

Third Sunday of Easter

Psalm 16

Acts 2:14a, 36-47

1 Peter 1:17-21

Luke 24:13-35

In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore! (Psalm 16:11) But how do we come into his presence? And what pleasures, in fact, await us?

The familiar story of the disciples traveling toward Emmaus shows that seeing is not necessarily believing; in their case sight only came at God's time and in God's way (Luke 24:16, 31). Despite the women's report of an empty tomb, the angelically-mediated word of his being alive and the disciples' own eyewitness certification of the women's observations, no one saw *him* (v. 24). Cleopas and his fellow disciple were reduced to debating about the significance of all this (24:14-15), with sullen looks (24:17).

The first move toward recognizing his presence came when Jesus turned himself into an exegete of the Pentateuch and Prophets (I shudder to think that I teach these two as required courses at Christ Seminary — Seminex). While they later admitted that his exegesis made their hearts burn, it really did not open their eyes. Courses in Pentateuch and Prophets are tough going, especially if you are to understand *all* (24:25) that is recorded therein.

Part of their unbelieving resulted from partisan reading of a prophet like Isaiah. Expecting Jerusalem to be made the world's tallest mountain with all nations flocking to it (Isa. 2:2) is a far cry from the mighty prophet they had experienced (24:19), and who had now been reduced, via capital punishment, to a disappointing candidate for messiah, whose whereabouts and renewed life were only a matter of unsubstantiated rumor (24:21-24).

Where was the paradise promised by Isaiah for the messianic age, when wild animals would chum around with domestic livestock and children play with snakes made no longer dangerous

(Isaiah 11:6-9)? Not only had these good things not visibly arrived, but the fate of Jesus of Nazareth seemed so contrary to the prophetic agenda: we had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel (24:21).

Jesus' interpretation of the Scriptures defined messiahship quite differently and proved to be an essential part of his eye-opening operation. It was *necessary* for the Messiah to suffer and so enter into his glory (v. 26). Such necessity (cf. Luke 2:49; 4:43; 9:22; 17:25; 19:5; 22:37) showed that the suffering and death of Jesus were not the tragic end to a promising career or the last hurrah of a political hopeful. Rather, this was the plan of the Father, perfectly in accord with the total message of Scripture, and just as glorious, in intention and hope, as Isaiah had indicated all along. To which texts did Jesus refer? Isaiah 53, one would think, and Psalm 22 (though not in Moses and the prophets, it would be part of *all the scriptures*, v. 27). Might he have alluded to Moses himself, who was rejected and yet sent by God as ruler and deliverer (Acts 7:35)? The second lesson for the day supports the Lukan perspective: You were redeemed, not with silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ (1 Peter 1:19). This Christ was raised from the dead and thereby given glory, so that faith and hope might be in God alone (1 Peter 1:21).

The two disciples, who walked with him and looked at him, did not yet see him. That revelation awaited his fellowship at table with them in the breaking of bread. Some commentators see in this meal a kind of messianic banquet where the accepting fellowship of Jesus is the main point; others interpret the meal as eucharistic. Whatever the original intention of Luke, Christians today will relate this meal to the Eucharist and so they should. The fellowship Jesus offers to the Emmaus disciples is the same he offers throughout Luke to publicans and sinners (5:29-30). It is the kind of accepting and forgiving fellowship that was

given the thief on the cross (23:43). It was this fellowship of the risen Jesus that finally opened their eyes so that they recognized him. Seeing him in the breaking of bread was truly enough — Jesus vanished immediately out of their sight. What he left behind was faith and the witness of the two disciples to their colleagues: He was known to us in the breaking of bread (v. 35). No doubt many in Luke's original audience had experienced Jesus in such bread-breaking. There, too, is where our eyes are opened time after time.

In addition to faith (recognition) and testimony, the fellowship offered by Jesus inaugurates and evokes life together in ideal community, as we read in the first lesson. Believers in the risen Jesus held all things in common, distributed material things to those in need, worshipped in the temple together, and partook of food with glad and generous hearts (Acts 2:44-47). These activities must be thought through in the sermon so that they begin to take concrete form in the life of the congregation, and in the lives of the singles and families who make up

the preacher's audience.

In God's presence mediated by the risen Jesus are such pleasures forevermore! Not really, of course; or better, not yet. The early Christian community had Ananias and Sapphira, who tarnished the glow of that silver age (Acts 5), and we measure up to Acts 2:44-47 neither as individuals or congregations, let alone as church bodies. Still, this ideal picture exerts a kind of eschatological magnetism, reminding us of what might be and what shall be, and constantly shattering our satisfaction with the not-so-ideal status quo. And more: the message of the suffering, vindicated Christ and his fellowship with us through word and sacraments constantly recreate this ideal life among us in tokens and down-payments which are no less real than our selfishness and sin. In his presence already now is, at least sometimes, fullness of joy. Just think what's coming in the forevermore!

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Fourth Sunday of Easter

Psalm 23

Acts 6:1-9; 7:2a, 51-60

1 Peter 2:19-25

John 10:1-10

Twin dangers beset preachers on Good Shepherd Sunday: sentimentality and failure to speak about the resurrection. It's a good time, of course, for speaking about the earth being full of the goodness of the Lord (cf. the Introit for the old Second Sunday after Easter), especially as nature bursts with the life of Spring, echoing the new life given him whom we hail as King of Creation. But the only allusion to the resurrected one comes in Stephan's confession in the first lesson: "I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God"

(Acts 2:56). Directing the whole show, therefore, is the one who now stands exalted in the heavenly places with the

Father.

Psalm 23 is a song of trust expressed from a sheep's point of view. No congregation would be impoverished by hearing once more its words about simple confidence in God, in good times and bad, and about the true earthly goodness of the Lord.

Jesus presents himself in the Gospel as the real shepherd of the sheep (v. 11, assigned to Series B, speaks of him as the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep). This trustworthy shepherd (the identity of the robber shepherds in v. 1 is a matter of serious exegetical debate) knows each sheep by name. Recall the picture

of Yahweh's redeemer or divine kinsman (Isaiah 43:1), who knows all sons and daughters of God by their true identity, their names. Or reflect on that gracious anthropomorphism by which he assured Zion, who thought she had been deserted in exile: "I have graven you on the palms of my hand" (Isaiah 49:16). She could never be forgotten. This shepherd gives his sheep an abundant life (John 10:10). Shades of Psalm 23! The second lesson refers to him as the shepherd and guardian (literally, bishop) of our lives (1 Peter 2:25).

While Jesus is a shepherd according to John 10:1-5, 8, and 10, he designates himself the sheepgate in John 10:7 and 9. In the background may be an allusion to Psalm 118:20: "This is the gate of Yahweh; the righteous enter through it." The more immediate, Johannine context, of course, comes in 14:6: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me." As sheepgate, Jesus provides access to the Father. 1 Peter 2:24 clarifies the evangelical message: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed."

Many a preacher may see fit to use this Sunday to equip the flock for faith and trust, but a goal of obedience is also germane to the appointed lessons. The sheep follow him because they recognize the voice of the shepherd (John 10:4). Or turn that around: because they recognize the voice of the shepherd, the sheep follow him. This good shepherd does not only make his sheep lie down in green pastures; he lays down his life for the sheep! The second lesson also suggests preaching toward a goal of obedience: "You were straying like sheep, but have now returned" (1 Peter 2:25). Good Shepherd Sunday is a time for the preacher to use the gospel to create good sheep!

Another kind of following is urged in the second lesson. The pericope originally addressed servants who were unfairly treated, but in contemporary ap-

plication we may tend to think of suffering in a broader sense. Those ancient servants were assured that if they suffered patiently when doing right they would have God's approval. Christ also *suffered* for us and thereby left an example for walking in his way (1 Peter 2:21). This salvific suffering of Christ is a particularly apt gospel for consoling or motivating one who is suffering. We might well expect, "He *died* for you," and in fact many ancient scribes made this substitution as they copied the Greek text (cf. the textual apparatus). Christ did not retaliate, verbally or otherwise, against his persecutors. Since he trusted in God who judges righteously, he could be sure of the outcome of his own ordeal (Ah, there's another chance to repeat the Easter message!). Following the example of Jesus when we suffer is a kind of obedience, but he also showed in suffering a superb kind of faith!

The death of Stephen models a third kind of following. Meditating on the church's martyrs can be salutary, but it can also produce a gospel almost as romantic as many a picture of the Good Shepherd. Perhaps the report about Stephen can tell us something about everyday living and common, ordinary dying. He prayed, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60). Like his Lord, he did not revile or threaten. He followed Jesus, who on the cross prayed, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). His death was a good martyr's death, but really his words are good for any dying: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (Acts 7:59). And again, of course, there was good, dominical precedent (Luke 23:46).

Some wag once said that only a sheep could understand the 23rd Psalm. Only a person with a shepherd who has both given his life and had it restored can trust and follow. That's the Good News for Good Shepherd Sunday.

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