

## Divergence on the Lectionary - Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year B

### First Reading

Acts 4:5–12

On the next day their rulers and elders and scribes gathered together in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. And when they had set them in the midst, they inquired, “By what power or by what name did you do this?” Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well. This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” (ESV)

### Second Reading

1 John 3:16–24

By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us. (ESV)

### Gospel Text

John 10:11–18

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.” (ESV)

## Comments and Questions for Discussion

### First Reading

I have two elements I'd like to point to concerning our reading from Acts this week.

The first revolves around this, the third of Peter's evangelistic speeches. This, like last week's speech, follows upon the healing of the man crippled from birth. I have written before about this sequence - miracle -> preaching the Gospel - but I can't pass this third such speech (the first two being Peter's on Pentecost and the one to the people just after the healing of the crippled man) without harkening back to that pattern. I believe that God still does miracles. I believe that God still intends to see us do miracles in the Name of Jesus. I believe that this is meant to be an accompaniment, often a precursor to the preaching of Good News.

God's new creation, inaugurated in Jesus, shakes our preconceptions of what life is and can be right to their foundations. Miracles are a demonstration of that, as John puts it in his Gospel, "signs" of the power and presence of the Kingdom. We were never meant to have to convince the world of God's love apart from astounding demonstrations of that love. Of course not every sharing of the Gospel will be occasioned by a miracle, but one such event creates ripples, continuing opportunities to speak of the goodness and glory of God. The speech we read today is the second such opportunity resulting from the healing of the crippled man.

There has been great evangelistic preaching in the past unsupported by "signs" of the presence of God, and I do not mean to say that such cannot exist, but such anointing is rare. Apart from the Billy Graham phenomenon, all of the other great events that I can think of, like the Great Awakening, were accompanied by other outpourings of the Holy Spirit.

This brings me (quite unintentionally!) to the second of the elements that concern me in our reading. "...there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

I believe that, though my understanding of what it means is quite different from the way that text is appropriated by my evangelical siblings.

I believe that the message of the Gospel, that we are reconciled to God by the death and resurrection of Jesus, that salvation has come in a singular way in that event. Strangely, the particularity of the Gospel's saving power is supported by the work of Rene Girard. Until the last years of his career Girard maintained that among all the faiths he'd studied, only the Gospel held the key to dismantling of our system of victimizing scapegoats through its unmasking of the scapegoat mechanism. In his later years, Rene did try to identify certain similar strains in other religions, but it always seemed a stretch. He'd never been as welcome in academic circles as I think he'd have liked to be because of his conclusions regarding the Gospel (particularly the Passion Narratives) and it always seemed to me that he went looking for that academic approval through his later efforts.

My point, though, is that there is something in the Gospel, that God saves not through the imposition of order but through the establishment the centrality of forgiveness, that the world desperately needs and that has no equal. This is what I believe it means to say that "there is no other Name by which it is necessary to be saved." I have slightly retranslated that verse because I don't think Luke meant it to be a command, just a description of what that Name brings. That is, in this Name, the Name of Jesus, there can only be salvation. The Name of Jesus necessarily brings salvation in its wake. And only that name makes salvation necessary. Yes, there may be other religions in which this forgiveness also results in the restoration of humanity to relationship with God, but it is the same principal, the same Name. As Jesus puts it in John our reading this week from John 10, "And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd."

But in no other faith that I know of is the centrality of forgiveness preached as it is preached from the foot of the Cross. The world needs a Gospel that is real Good News, not the twisted authoritarianism that is the dominant public face of Christianity these days. And this preaching was never intended to have to exist without the presence of the miraculous to demonstrate the power and presence of the Love it proclaims.

I've gone on too long for this section, so I'll close with one of my favorite phrases, "Why should we let the conservatives have all the fun?"

## Second Reading

“...and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.”

This harkens back to the reading above concerning the Name of Jesus. “Whatever we ask we receive from Him,” to me, speaks to my transformed heart and the desires that change as a result of believing in, trusting in the Name of Jesus. That is... when I trust that I am reconciled to God through God’s own self-giving and sacrifice, I love as God loves, and I desire what God desires, so *of course* I receive what I ask for. I’m only asking for what God already wants to give.

I’d like to shift the focus for a moment to “commandments.” First, many of you will hear the NRSV read on Sunday morning, where it reads, “... because we obey his commandments..” rather than “keep.” That’s an unfortunate translation, really an interpretation of the word there that really does say “keep.” I prefer “keep” because I think it speaks more truly to the Johannine notion of “holding dear” the commandments that Jesus has given us. Indeed, that’s really what the author of the letter says in verse 23 where it reads, “just as he has commanded us.” What it says, quite literally is, “just as the were given the commandments.” Now, I may be playing at words, but I think that the verb “give” says a lot about how commandments work. They’re a gift. They aren’t meant as a burden, but as a gift. How often does the psalmist rhapsodize on the gift of God’s “precepts?” I believe that commandments from God (as opposed to those we experience from earthly authorities!) contain within them a kernel of empowerment. It’s like God says, “Okay, I’d like you to go do this, oh, and before you leave, here’s a (super)power to help you accomplish it.” This is why there is so much fruit for the psalmist in meditating on God’s precepts.

So yes, we receive what we ask for because our hearts are changed when we’re delivered from fear by the truth of what God has done in Jesus, and we receive gratefully the “command” to put our trust in that truth and to love as we have been loved.

## Gospel Text

Before writing anything on the verses we have for this Sunday, I really need to set them in some context. Jesus’ explanation here of what it means to be the “good shepherd” is really the conclusion of a longer speech, so I’ll quote the verses that precede it here:

John 10:1–10

“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.” This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So Jesus again said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. (ESV)

So when Jesus speaks of Himself as the “good shepherd” He is very specifically contrasting Himself with those who “do not enter by the door.” He also describes them as “thieves” and “robbers.”

In the earlier decades of the 20th century, a number of scholars were confused by what they saw as the awkward introduction of the “I am the door” teaching into the middle of two sections about the shepherd. Many tried to suggest that this section was not original to the speech, but a later insertion. (Bultmann being perhaps the most influential of them.) Thankfully, scholars of the later 20th and early 21st centuries saw beyond this error and have identified here a way of writing that they call a “spiral,” in which the text circles around the same subject, coming back to it again and again, each time with greater depth. So “the door” is an explanation of the door through which the “shepherd” comes and the “good shepherd” is an explanation of what separates the “shepherd” from the thieves and robbers.

It’s worth noting here that the word used for “good” here is *kalos*, not *agathos*. *Agathos* is the word that is usually translated as “good” and “*kalos*” means something more like “honorable” or “noble.” So Jesus says of Himself that He is the “honorable” shepherd, a word that contrasts him not with “evil” shepherds, but “cowardly” or “shameful” shepherds. “Good” makes a better translation here, but I think it’s good to understand what the intended contrast is.

So Jesus is “good” because He lays down His life for the sheep. This sharply contrasts with thieves and robbers who sneak around rather than risk their lives. There has been a good deal of speculation about whom Jesus meant here. This speech follows

immediately on the healing of the man blind from birth who is then put out of the synagogue. Some suggest then that the shameful shepherds would be the scribes and Pharisees who had done this. On the other hand, “shepherd” is only used for Kings and political authorities in the Hebrew Scriptures, so others think that these are the people Jesus intends. I decline to decide, myself. John’s Gospel is fond of ambiguity, so I think that this might refer to either.

There is another interesting bit of ambiguity in the “I am the door” section, but I’ll leave that for another year.

Final comment. I don’t want to overlook the “I am” statement that begins our reading. While this singular manner of speaking echoes what Moses heard at the burning bush, “I am that I am,” it is worth noting that in only the case of the phrase “before Abraham was, I am,” do we have “I am” without “I am (something).” (The predicate nominative.) As in our reading today, many times when Jesus says “I am” today He is “the good shepherd.” In these cases it is probably jumping too far to suggest that Jesus is choosing for Himself the divine Name each time. Rather, He is echoing God’s manner of describing Their own attributes. Such uses of “I am” with the predicate nominative have long been said to be absent from the Hebrew Scriptures, which has led Johannine scholars to conclude that each “I am” statement should be read as a use of the divine Name, YHWH. In fact, though, there *are* places where God uses this form to describe Themselves.

This does sometimes seem to me to be a “distinction without a difference.” After all, if Jesus is using a form that parallels God’s self-revelatory statements rather than God’s Name, isn’t He making a similar (if more veiled) claim for Himself? I suppose that He is. Still, I found it somehow freeing to find that I can now read this “I am” statements without weighting those two words as though each should read “I AM!”