

Trinity Church (ELCA)

Stephens City, Virginia

Sunday's Sermon

April 17, 2016

The Rev. Mr. Cameron P. Keyser

Easter 4-C

Got a question...well, a few questions – I always “got a few questions,” don’t I? You don’t have to raise your hands – just answer them honestly to yourself:

“Do you actually *listen*” to the words of – say, the “Prayers” or the Confession we share together every Sunday? or, do you focus on just routine reading, and how long it looks?

Do you sing the lyrics – word by word – in the hymns, or are you more concerned with keeping up with the music? If you *sing* the words, do they just come out of your mouth, or take root in your heart?

What do you *listen* to when we sing: the beautiful tones of your own voice? The masterful notes from “Twinkle Fingers Gearhart” on the organ? Or – do you work at trying to make sure it doesn’t seem that you’re the only one singing?

What distracts you in worship? thinking about how much housework – or homework - waiting on you when you get home? How the color of Alice’s dress just doesn’t “do anything for her this morning?” Maybe an unexpected interruption? I noticed *last* Sunday when a visitor came in late, everybody’s head moved in unison from (here) to gawking over (there). You actually stared so long, that I was just about to stop and walk over to see what was going on. Yep. It was that noticeable!

And, what do you *remember* about this time we spend together, say, by late on a Sunday afternoon? something whispered to you at the peace? A tidbit from coffee time? That mistake Ricky or I made in the liturgy?... more *me* than Ricky...I’m not going to even *ask* if you remember the sermon...

I want you to *think* about these things because today, we’ve just heard one of the most beautiful, comforting, inspirational poems in all of Scripture: the “Shepherd’s poem” - the 23rd psalm. But, I really wonder, today, if it’s anything more than pretty words and lofty thoughts...

Most of the psalms are written in the first person, and each is both a prayer and a hymn – that’s how the Israelites used them in their little synagogues.

But, this 23rd Psalm comes off more like an *anthem* in a cathedral: a masterpiece of soaring syllables and a personal credo by which the writer declares how he lives.

But, how does he *do* that? And, what about us? How do We hear this psalm in a way that makes a “difference”? Have any of you ever found these words to ring true in your life? *How* is the Lord your “shepherd?” What’s that mean? In identifiable and quantitative ways - measureable & calculable: what can you put your finger on that makes that genuinely profound for you?

Where are the “green pastures” to which he sends you? The “still waters” by which he leads? When’s the last time you can remember him “restoring your soul,” or being so sure that “goodness and mercy” are “following” you that you

actually said “Thanks, God” out loud? What does it mean in the 21st century to claim the “Lord” as your “shepherd” – and what does that look like in your life?

Making those ancient, idyllic words make sense in these confusing, frustrating, and often terrifying days is no easy task...especially if we’re not listening – or not able to “hear.”

Now, I don’t want to get too technical here – because I don’t even understand all this stuff, but, it sure *sounds* impressive...believe it or not: 90% of all the data in the world has been generated over only the last 2 years...the average American consumes hours’ worth - of information every day – and that’s not including what you ingest at work. Between the dawn of civilization thru 2003 about 5 exabytes of total information was created - *now*, according to Eric Schmidt, former CEO of Google – *that* much information is created every 2 *days* ... If you text, you send or receive an average of 35 texts per day; office workers spend 28% of their time dealing with e-mails; and, when you surf the web, you’re exposed to 1,707 banner ads each month...

Now, compare all that to the fact that the human brain has a theoretical memory cache of 2.5 petabytes total – that’s about a million gigabytes...but, the maximum concurrent pieces of information a human brain can handle is only 7...

Our lives are overflowing with data and numbers - from income tax numbers: earned numbers, spent numbers, invested numbers, saved numbers - which we send off to a numbered address with our Social Security number on it – and our numbers are put into a computer along with the numbers of millions of others - and we become yet *another* number: our Tax ID number. The state knows us by our driver’s license number; the bank: by our account number. And when we retire, nobody’ll remember our name, just our AARP number!

America’s Poet Laureate – at least in my book: Jimmy Buffett explains it in his piece *“Everybody’s On the Phone”* – and I paraphrase: *“Message in a bottle, rhythm of a drum - smoke signals and telegraphs make the airwaves hum... but that’s all ancient history like (thongs) and Lincoln logs: now we’re livin’ like the Jetsons in a wacky wireless fog...*

Do you remember dialing up? Yes, I remember well. But, now I just can’t go anywhere without my sacred cell. I think that I might die if I miss anything at all: text me, e-mail, link me up: just give me a little call.

Everybody’s on the phone: so connected yet all alone...from pizza boy to socialite: we all salute the satellites. I’m ADD on AOL: a digital explorer in analog roam – talkin’, squawkin’, hawkin’...and, everybody’s on the phone.”

A census taker was making his rounds in the lower East Side of Manhattan and encountered a woman outside on

the porch. "Lady, I'm taking the Census. What's your name, and how many kids do you have?"

"Well, let me see," she replied: my name is Mary...and then there's Marcia, and Duggie, and Amy, and Patrick, and..."

"Never mind the names," he gruffly broke in. "Just give me the numbers."

"Well, sir! We ain't got into numberin' them yet," she said. "We ain't run out of names!"

This morning's gospel text tells us it's like that with God: he ain't run out of names – and remembers each of us by the name he gave us at our baptism: "my Child..." and the "very hairs on our heads" are counted.

Even God seems to make use of 'numbers' sometimes – although with many of us, that 'hair' number is dwindling pretty quickly...

Distracted, strung-out, worried - bombarded by numbers and words and work – we've been deafened to the still, small voice of the Good Shepherd.

At the risk of sounding like a stuffed shirt – which you all know "just ain't so" – it seems to me that what we - and generations before us knew as the "real" world is dissolving: melting into a variety of *virtual* worlds. The rejection of individual identity, denial of anything transcendent, the rejection of reason, and of ultimate – or even generally-accepted Truth – is the new order of the day for this "post-modern" culture of ours. All the old human habits about life: including – in North Carolina at least - even "*bathroom*" order – are now being revolutionary redefined: with traditional values and a clear division of social roles seemingly disintegrating into a radical flow of random and 'imaginary' events, making life lean toward becoming something like a dream or a literary fiction.

Until recently, Christianity was criticized in academic and scientific circles because it was perceived as unscientific and, therefore, 'untrue.' Today, however, Christianity is rejected simply because it claims the Truth - condemning as "intolerant" and "arrogant" any who claim to know an objective truth or a universal one. The 'truth' is essentially defined by the individual as truth claims are now being created

– no longer discovered by reason, observation or revelation. Almost nothing is forbidden, everything is allowed. 'Tolerance' seems to be perhaps the only value claimed in our postmodernist society.

And, we feel disoriented – uprooted from the world we've known – replaced with a sense – of "impermanence." It reminds me of a story that took place when much of the world was unknown and mostly unmapped.

Cartographers used dragons, monsters and large fish to indicate those frightening, dangerous, and fearsome places – yet, the commander of a Roman battalion was caught up in a battle that took him into "monsters and dragons" territory – and he didn't know how to proceed. So, a message went back to Rome with this urgent – but simple - request: "Send new orders, for we have marched off the map."

In some ways, we – and our culture – have 'marched off the map' as well" into uncharted waters where there are "ghoulies and ghosties and long-leggedy beasties - and things that go 'bump' in the night..." And *worse*.

We need a shepherd. We need a guide. We need what the Good Shepherd so lavishly provides. But, we have to undistract ourselves from the noise and demands and clamor going on all around us and *listen*: listen – with our *heart*. You won't hear 'voices' or any-thing screwy – but, you *will* get the "word." Ya' might not particularly like it – like some shepherding *I* seem to have been receiving of late – but, as the great Methodist preacher of the last century – Dr. Leslie Weatherhead once answered a reporter's question about what he had learned from life?" "Many things," he replied. "Many things - but the most outstanding is this: "life will only work out one way – and that is *God's way*."

You may stop loving God, but God will *never* stop loving you. You may run away from God, but you'll soon find that your legs are too short. We can't get away from god- and that's his promise! God's out on every road where people - like sheep – get themselves lost, doing his best to get their attention, and lead them back. We're not looking for him. he's looking for us...and calling us by name. "My sheep hear my voice" ...if only we'll *listen*.

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