

“Terror and Security”

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Psalm 23; John 10:1-10

Sunday April 13th, 2008

You don't need me to tell you it is an election year. You know that one president approaches the end of a final term in office, and several others are racing to take the place of our Commander in Chief of our United States. We're hearing all about the particular strengths and weaknesses of the potential candidates, and there is much speculation about what the future may hold for leaders of our country and for those being led, for Jane and Joe Q. Public.

What's ahead? Well, leadership transitions are not new to the world. They happen all the time. Sometimes they are peaceful and orderly; sometimes they are violent and create prolonged upheaval. Either way, they almost always bring change.

Long ago, when Moses could see that his time on earth was limited, he had a little talk with God about who would succeed him. Moses had led the people of Israel through one of the rockiest transitions ever for a people: slavery to self-sufficiency, and it hadn't been a quick and easy transition. A forty-year camping trip in one of the world's most severe deserts, with a crowd prone to whining, would be enough of a challenge for any leader. Add to that the need to forge an identity among the people that would reflect their uniqueness as a people with a God and a faith unlike any other in the world.

So when Moses could see his beard becoming gray and when he could feel ordinary tasks taking more effort, he began to think, “What is next for this people? Who will take my place as their leader, and who will sort out their complaints against me and against God and against the wind? Who will see their need and direct their energies toward the things that give life and blessing?”

So he took his concerns to God. In the Book of Numbers, chapter 27 (15-17), this is what we read: “Moses spoke to the LORD, saying, ‘Let the LORD, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint someone over the congregation who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, so that the congregation of the LORD may not be like sheep without a shepherd.’” After that, Moses was directed to Joshua, and Moses could rest easily, knowing that the people would not be scattered “like sheep without a shepherd” when the time of his departing would inevitably come.

Jesus uses some of this narrative for his figure of speech in today's lesson from John's Gospel. He speaks of a shepherd for the sheep “who shall lead them out and bring them in,” someone who shall lead like a shepherd after the reliable manner of Moses and

Joshua, someone who shall continually seek to bring life and blessing to a people who would otherwise become lost and scattered in the desert wildernesses of our world.

The only thing is, those who heard what Jesus had to say didn't get it. It was a hard saying for them, and perhaps a little too close to home. If you scan chapter 9, right before today's lesson, you'll see that Jesus healed a blind man. Surely that would be a good thing, right? But no, the man happened to be healed on the Sabbath, and things got complicated for him, and then they got complicated for Jesus, and no one seemed to be happy for a man who could finally see the world around him. They were all in an uproar because they thought one of their laws had been violated. One thing led to another, and this healing brought Jesus into conflict with the religious authorities. The pettiness of minding their word and their authority and staying off their turf was more important to them than the fact that a blind man could now rejoice over sunsets and find his way around town on his own.

In the charged words that Jesus uses in response to those religious leaders, Jesus alleges that these leaders are spiritually blind, and full of sin. Those aren't words that win friends. After leaving their jaws hanging open with these searing words, Jesus continues with three word pictures about sheep and their leadership. The religious leaders don't come off looking very good, either. The true way into the sheepfold, the gate to the people, is the way of God, and too many leaders have invented their own way to try to lead the people. These leaders are called thieves and bandits, and interestingly enough, the spiritually blind leaders that Jesus addresses appear to have become spiritually deaf, as well. That tends to happen when people hear something they don't want to hear. They conveniently don't get it. John writes, "Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them."

They don't understand that there is God's way to lead people, and then there are loads of other ways to lead people. The gate to the sheepfold is supposed to portray God's way to be among the people as a leader. But then can't you just picture the thieves and bandits crawling over the walls of the sheepfold to get to the sheep? Sort of like pirates, "har-har-ing" with sabers clenched in their teeth as they storm the deck of a ship. The point is, unless a leader leads in God's way, and comes to the sheep by way of the gate, instead of by way of some other invented method, that leader will more than likely have little interest in the well-being of the sheep. Such a backdoor leader will have his or her own agenda for leading the sheep, such as personal gain or vindictiveness, or something that is all about them and next to nothing about the sheep. The sheep will be used and abused under such shepherding.

So the religious leaders listening to Jesus don't get it. Jesus tries again, and no doubt he stuns them again with his words. "Okay then, I am the gate. I am God's way to the sheep. I am not the backdoor or the secretive crawlspace used to seize the sheep. I am God's way to lead the sheep. Watch what I do. Hear what I say. See how God will use me to bring life, and life abundant, to the sheep!"

Our lesson today does not include the third image used by Jesus. That is one in which he states, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd **lays down his life** for the sheep." In other words, to care for the people as God cares for them, the shepherd may need to risk his own life for the life and well-being of the sheep. "Watch what I do," says Jesus, "Hear what I say." How many leaders care enough about those that are led that they would risk life and limb to give life, and life abundant, to those others?

So, you may be saying, that's a good standard for anybody elected to do something, but what does that have to do with me? I'm not running for president.

It has everything to do with you. Remember, in the image that Jesus uses, the sheep know the voice of their shepherd, and they aren't about to follow anybody else. They know what their shepherd sounds like. They know what their shepherd acts like. They aren't going to chase after just anybody.

In like manner, you are the Church. You, of all people, pray and study and try to follow after Jesus as his disciples. You are the people who listen for the voice and wisdom and direction of Jesus Christ for this world. You can insist that all the leaders of today go through the gate of God's standards instead of through any knee-jerk, human-created ruts of leadership. You can insist that leaders care about the people that they are called to serve, from the very youngest to the very oldest, and that leaders abandon any claim to self-aggrandizement or personal gain. And, most of all, you can set the example of what it is to use God's gate for guidance in the way you live every part of your own life.

It seems that terrorism and security guide a lot of our decisions these days, about the type of leadership we choose, or about the way we choose to spend our resources for protection, whether that is right or wrong. Be careful not to run to whatever looks secure on the outside, at the price of abandoning the true security offered by the life-giving gate of God's way, and by the good shepherd who never abandons us. It is so easy to say, "If only we destroy those who threaten us, we'll be safe!" But stand back and look at that. Whatever happened to ensuring the life and life abundant for those human beings, who are also loved by God, who are too easily written off by us as a "threat"?

I'll let you turn that over in your mind prayerfully in the coming days. And add this to your musings: God will never abandon you. No matter what kind of terror seems to be at the door, God will be your protective shepherd. Just as Jesus, the one who would show us God's manner, stood by humanity all the way to a cross, God will always be present with you. As the very heart of the Psalm says, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me...." Instead of being guided by fear throughout your years, you have a shepherd who will guide you to life, and life abundant. Thanks be to God! Amen.