Fourth Sunday of Easter May 7, 2017

All Saints’ Year C

Acts 2:42-47 1 Peter 2:19-25

Psalm 23 John 10:1-10

Jesus speaks to us this morning with “I Am” statements….. which he does often in the Gospel of John:

I am light, life and love. I am the way. I am truth.

Sometimes our Gospel writer has Jesus only say, I AM, which echoes the burning bush encounter that Moses has with the great I AM, the Breath of all Creation. John wants us to know that with Jesus, we are having that same Moses encounter:

Jesus, the Christ, has chosen us even before the world was made (Ephesians 1:4).

I Am; You Are (says Jesus). We are inextricably bound. We are his and he is ours. Jesus is as present with you as God was with Moses in the burning bush… Always has, always will be.

In this morning’s gospel, Jesus is both the Shepherd and the Gate.

The symbol of Jesus as the Good Shepherd has had power for Christians since the very early church. This image has been drawn on catacombs and house-church walls as early as the third century. In mosaic and fresco, stained glass and wood, the shepherd with the lamb around his shoulders has comforted Christians in every century and around the world…. The Lord is my shepherd, and I shall not want…

The Lord comforts us, leads us, restores us, anoints us, follows us, (the better Greek translation is pursues, hounds) us all the days of our lives. Yes, we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever- because we belong. All belong

Not so comforting or reassuring, maybe, is the idea of Jesus as the Gate. If Jesus is the Gate, then he is also the gatekeeper, who functions as the watchdog, the person who keeps people out, who lets certain people in, who is like a sentinel making sure to guard the gate for those who can come in. Insiders and Outsiders. Saved and Unsaved. Exclusive acts.

Or so we think. (I think not).

I am reminded of my Uncle Sonny, who owned a large sheep ranch in northern California. When it was shearing time, the sheep would come close to the ranch house, corralled in a large fenced in area for the convenience of the shearers. My uncle, a generous man and a good rancher, always invited his neighbors in the county whose ranches were not as large to avail themselves of his corral. And they did- hundreds of “other” sheep gathered in Uncle Sonny’s corral.

One day, at the height of shearing, standing on the bottom railing of the fence so I could see, I asked Uncle Sonny, “There are so many sheep from so many different ranches, and they all look the same, but everyone seems to know whose sheep are whose- how’s that?”

“I know my sheep. I call out to them and they follow. And they know my dogs as well. It’s that way with all of us. We know our sheep, but more importantly, ***they know us***.”

In the middle of his own parable telling, Jesus tells us about the shepherd, “He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought them out all his own, he goes ahead of them and the sheep follow him because ***they know his voice***.”

The gate in this scenario has a very simple function. It has nothing to do with excluding. It’s the way into protection, into safety, into satisfaction and celebration. The necessary fence protected the sheep from thieves and bandits and wolves, and the gate was the opening. All the ranchers gathered there with their coffee, their stories, and their delight in the shearing season. It was a meeting point.

And then when the deed was done, they called out their sheep, and their sheep followed, walked out the gate, and they went home. A coming and a going.

This is not a one-way kind of knowing. It is not merely a matter of ***us*** being known, for Jesus and real-life shepherding tells us that the sheep ***also know him***.

Deep, deep mutuality. Jesus is our Gateway to experiencing this deep, deep mutuality.

We have a shepherd, who loves us so much, who is willing to die for us because of this love, who has come to bring us life, life abundant. Who knows us individually and calls us by our true name, and who gives himself to us so that we may know him as well.

This is the crux of the Easter good news: We are invited into a relationship with him that is marked by the deepest intimacy and most vulnerable mutuality we could ever imagine.

How many of you listened to Jimmy Kimmel tell us about the harrowing experience of the birth of his baby boy, Billy on his late-night comedy show, on national TV? If you haven’t, all you need to do is go on YouTube and put in Jimmy Kimmel’s name and the 12-minute clip will come up. I could easily watch it again as he shared so freely, so emotionally, with tears flying, about the discovery of his newborn’s heart defect and how all the nurses, doctors and surgeons rallied to save his son’s life, and save it they did. He walked us through those 72 hours, especially the three longest hours of his life while his son was in surgery. “Never had so many atheists been praying for us.”

Who would have thought a sermon was emerging for Jimmy Kimmel’s comedy show, but he had his world-wide audience laughing and crying as he lifted up for us all the ways we are in each other’s hands when we are living through pain, and fear and terror. And Jimmy Kimmel through the scare of his life connected with every parent throughout the world who has lost a child or came close to losing a child, and so did we.

This isn’t about sentimentality. It’s bold truth telling. It’s about loving. It’s about revealing, turning ourselves inside out, and then turning ourselves over to each other. It’s about making Meaning out of the randomness of life and all its absurdities. It’s in this vulnerability that we recognize Jesus’ presence, his shout-out. It’s about hearing the shepherd’s voice, who is calling us to life’s abundancy even with death lurking. Jimmy Kimmel opened his heart to us. We knew it and we opened up our hearts in return. It was all just so Real.

When Jesus suggests that he is not only the Good Shepherd, but also the Gate, he is inviting us to see as he sees. When we can’t find the gate into Jesus’ safety, it’s often because we are trusting in an over-weening kind of self-sufficiency and independence…… all very tempting, especially because our society supports this kind of autonomy. And yes, we then become susceptible to the voices around us tempting us to live in a false sense of self- constructed through successes and failures, with winners and losers, through power and control, with alienation and isolation. A thinking that ranks some of us better than others.

When we are blind, it’s because we forget…… all so easy to do, that life rises out of the ashes, that love is greater than death, and that our lives matter, and that Jesus is our death-defier and our life-giver, using the very thing that normally would destroy us, to transform us.

Jesus is inviting us into his corral, safe to rest in his arms, to trust that he knows our suffering. That’s one of the ways we recognize Jesus’ voice, through our own suffering and our empathy for others who suffer. There are no dead ends.

Jesus is the Gate, showing us the way, so that we can become the gate for others.

One of my colleagues from Exeter, Marcia Carlisle, lived with and then died of a rare auto immune disease (poly-myo-sitis) that broke down her skeletal muscle tissue. Her colleagues and I were a part of her journey as she moved from abled body, to walking with a cane, to riding in a wheelchair, to finally her death. She worked almost to the very end, and told me one day that she had become a new kind of educator….

“I am teaching my students that what they can see with their own eyes is untrue……we believe falsely that we have control over what we can become….. yes, the becoming never ends….. but now I am in the wonder of what will become of me.

“And in that wonder, I am connecting with all those who suffer. I am hearing a new voice, the ‘unbecoming of able’ and in that new, vulnerable place, to a life bigger than death; I am whole, I am changed, I am one of the many. I am connected. I am at peace.”

That is what it means to be raised from the dead.

We are in the Good Shepherd’s hands; he is our gate to life, to life abundant. Amen