

“It was Winter”

**A sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, April 25th, 2010
at Sts. Peter and Paul Lutheran Church, Riverside, Illinois
Psalm 23; Revelation 7:9-17; and John 10:22-30**

“Shepherd me, O God, beyond my wants, beyond my fears, from death into life.”

It may be Easter and springtime in Riverside, but it is Hanukkah and wintertime in Solomon’s portico. “At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter. . .,” John tells us flatly. So simple. So complex. “It was winter. . .” I think it was St. Augustine who said that the Gospel of John is like an ocean that a child can play in but an elephant would drown in. The Gospel is written with some of the simplest Greek in the New Testament, yet the layers of meaning are many and multifaceted, and sometimes the simpler the phrase the greater the depth of its meaning.

Remember that cold phrase just after Judas has departed the upper room when Jesus has spoken of his betrayal, “. . . and it was night,” the narrator tells us. Or when Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb “early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark . . .” Twice we are told plainly that Nicodemus comes to Jesus “. . . by night.” So, we come here this Fourth Sunday of Easter, with springtime practically dripping on us, and the gospel writer gives us another one of those phrases, “It was winter.”

“It was winter,” or so we thought a few weeks ago on Easter morning. Of course, Hanukkah happens in wintertime during the weeks before Christmas, a “festival of lights” which celebrates the rededication of the Jerusalem temple two centuries before Jesus. Hanukkah, you may remember, recalls the victory of Judas Maccabeus over the Seleucids in Syria who, under Antiochus Epiphanes (“manifest god”) IV, had desecrated the Jewish temple by setting up an altar to the Greek god Zeus.

Here we are today, in springtime, in Easter, with Jesus strolling through that rededicated temple in winter at Hanukkah. You wonder what this dark, cold story is doing smack-dab in the middle of Easter on Good Shepherd Sunday no less. Here, in the Colonnade of Solomon, known as the “porch of judgment,” the only area of the original temple, dating back to Solomon in the tenth century, the place where the legal experts met to provide answers, here Jesus is asked point blank by the frustrated authorities: “How long will you keep irritating us? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” And you can almost hear Jesus sigh as he replies, “I have told you, and you don’t believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; but you don’t believe, because you don’t belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.”

Jesus is in the rededicated temple yet maybe John is suggesting that a sanctified building without a sanctified heart is, well, as cold and barren as winter. “I have told you, and you don’t believe. . . you’ve seen my works, evidence of who I am, and you don’t believe. . . My sheep hear my voice.” The wine at the wedding in Cana has been replenished. Multitudes have been fed with a few loaves and fishes. People have been resuscitated from the dead. Children have been healed who are no children of Israel, Canaanite children, Roman children, Syrophenician children. Jesus has come amid the cold and barren winter of people’s lives bringing the warmth and light of spring to them.

“I and the Father are one,” Jesus concludes. Of course, this is the final blow for the temple authorities. If you have ever watched the 1977 epic film series, *Jesus of Nazareth*, then you may remember the scene during Jesus’ trial before the Sanhedrin, when Anthony Quinn, playing the role of the high priest Caiaphas, rends his garments and recites the Great *Shema* from Deuteronomy 6, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord the your God is one. . .”

Jesus is saying, is he not, that the dwelling place of God is shifting on its foundations, moving from the temple in Jerusalem to his very own body: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up,” he will say. “. . . I and the Father are one.” “If you were my sheep, you’d hear my voice and know. But as it is now, all you have is this stone building and wintry hearts that care more about appeasing the Romans than about the desperation of the sheep who need to know the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for them. I am the Good Shepherd.”

Remember when Moses was shepherding the flock of his father-in-law, in the presence of the burning bush, he asked God what he should call Him when he goes up against Pharaoh. And God said to Moses, “I am who I am”. . . Thus you shall say the people of Israel, ‘I am has sent me to you.’” So, Jesus says, “I am . . .”; “I am the vine”; “I am the bread of life”; “I am living water”; “I am the door”; “I am the sheep gate”; “I am the light of the world”; “I am the resurrection and the life”; “I am the way, the truth, and the life”; “I am the good shepherd.” Jesus is the great “I am.”

“I and the Father are one.” And if you want to know God then look at Jesus. Look no longer to the temple but look to Jesus. “I am the good shepherd.” And that Good Shepherd saves people who nobody thought could be saved. Remember what the prophets Isaiah and Micah had said this about the temple. “. . . Many nations shall come and say: ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths’ . . . These I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer. . . for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”

“. . . My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” Jesus’ resurrected body becomes that temple, that “house of prayer for all peoples.” “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you,” Paul reminds the immoral Corinthians, “that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit which you have from God, and that you are not your own?” Is it not this Holy Spirit that empowers Peter in Acts to raise Tabitha from the dead? You are not your own. You belong to the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for you. You are a lamb of his own fold. You are a sheep of his hand. And to ask questions like, “What am I getting out of it? How am I benefitting from this? Have we gotten our money’s worth?” are questions that are neither befitting nor worthy of followers of the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for us.

There is a relentless reach in Jesus’ resurrected body among us, a kingdom that is always expanding its borders, a flock that is always receiving more lost lambs, a temple that is always welcoming more nations within its walls as Revelation envisions it today: “After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. . . they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd. . .”

“For the Lamb who was slain has begun his reign,” we sing in Easter.

“Now, which one of you,” Jesus asks, “having lost one sheep will not leave the ninety-nine sheep by themselves in the wilderness and go searching till you find the one lost sheep? Which one of you will not put that sheep on your shoulders like a lost child and say to your friends, ‘Come celebrate with me’? Which one of you would not do that?”

“Which of you,” Jesus continues, “if you lose a coin won’t tear up the house looking for it and when you have found that nickel won’t run out of the house and shout for everybody to ‘Come party with me, I found my lost coin!’ Which one of you wouldn’t do that?”

“And which of you dads who have two sons, when the younger one runs away from home, blows all your money, comes back home starving, won’t throw a big birthday party singing, ‘This son of mine was dead but is now alive!’ Which one of you would not do that?”

“And which of you, driving down the Jericho Road, upon seeing a stranger lying in the ditch half dead, somebody of a different race and religion from you, won’t risk your life, put the bloody man in the backseat of your Caravan, take him to the hospital, and spend all you have and more in order for him to get better? Which of you would not do that?”

Of course, the answer to Jesus’ questions is none of us. These are stories about “the Lamb who was slain who’s begun his reign.” A slaughtered Lamb, like all who are led to the slaughter, now reigns as the Shepherd of the sheep. And that “great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands” is the result of the seeking shepherd, the searching housewife, the prodigal father, the good Samaritan.

We all learned that favorite psalm this way: “Surely goodness and mercy shall *follow* me all the days of my life . . .” But now learn it again this way: “Surely goodness and mercy shall *pursue* me. . . Surely goodness and mercy shall *pursue* me all the days of my life. . .” Here is the Good Shepherd who just keeps pursuing us with goodness and mercy, not like some little pup following us around, but more like that “hound of heaven” in Francis Thompson’s poem. Thompson, you may know, was born in 19th century England, the son of a doctor. As an adult, he spent much of his life destitute and homeless as a result of an opium addiction (the drug had been used to treat an illness earlier in his life). Thompson tried to commit suicide on at least one occasion until his poems were discovered by a publisher couple. In the first stanza of his poem entitled, “Hound of Heaven,” Thompson writes of God pursuing us “down the nights and down the days. . . down the arches of the years. . . and in the midst of tears I hid from Him. . .”

“And therefore the suffering of abandonment is overcome by the suffering of love,” writes the German theologian Jurgen Moltmann, “. . . love which is not afraid of what is sick and ugly, but accepts it and takes it to

itself in order to heal it. Through his own abandonment by God, the crucified Christ brings God to those who are abandoned by God. Through his suffering he brings salvation to those who suffer. Through his death he brings eternal life to those who are dying” (from *The Crucified God*).

It *was* winter, but now it is spring. It *was* Friday, but now it is Easter.

“Shepherd me, O God, beyond my wants, beyond my fears, from death into life.”