

EASTER 4

Year C

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Acts 9:36-43

³⁶Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. ³⁷At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. ³⁸Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, “Please come to us without delay.” ³⁹So Peter got up and went with them, and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. ⁴⁰Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, “Tabitha, get up.” Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. ⁴¹He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. ⁴²This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. ⁴³Meanwhile, he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

Commentary from Molly Cooke

The collect for this week describes Jesus as the good shepherd, “who calls us each by name.” Names play a significant role in this passage from Acts, in which Peter—who was so nicknamed by Jesus himself—replicates the sort of healing work that Jesus did in the Gospels. Tabitha’s miraculous resurrection might specifically cause us to recall the healing of Jairus’ daughter (Matt. 9:18-26; Mark 5:21-43; Luke 8:40-9:6) with the Aramaic words “Talitha koum,” translated as “Little girl, get up!” Tabitha’s name is not far off from “Talitha,” the form of address used for Jairus’ daughter, which is perhaps why we are given both her Aramaic and her Greek name.

Aramaic does not show up often in the New Testament, which was written in Greek, so when it does, we can be sure it’s there for a reason. We might consider the significance of Jesus addressing Jairus’ daughter in her native tongue or of Peter calling Tabitha by her Aramaic name even though his instruction to “get up” is in Greek. Relationships with God are personal!

Discussion Questions

Like Peter and Tabitha, we are all inevitably called different names by different people with whom we have different relationships (think: nicknames, pet names, titles). Which, of your many names, are the ones God might call you by, and what significance do they have for you and your relationship with God?

Psalm 23

- ¹ The Lord is my shepherd; *
I shall not be in want.
- ² He makes me lie down in green pastures *
and leads me beside still waters.
- ³ He revives my soul *
and guides me along right pathways for his
Name's sake.
- ⁴ Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of
death, I shall fear no evil; *
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
- ⁵ You spread a table before me in the presence of
those who trouble me; *
you have anointed my head with oil,
and my cup is running over.
- ⁶ Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all
the days of my life, *
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for
ever.

Commentary from Molly Cooke

Psalm 23 is one of the earliest biblical instances of the good shepherd imagery used for today's collect, and it's pretty famous for showing up as a suitable option for use in Episcopal healing and burial services. With verses like "He revives my soul," and "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever," it is only too fitting.

Our oldest Hebrew manuscripts of the Psalms do not have vowel markings, so sometimes we come across words that could be translated multiple ways, depending on the missing vowels (imagine only seeing "bt" and deciding whether it means "bat," "bet," "bit," "bot," or "but"). In these cases, we can look at later translations to other languages or newer manuscripts with vowel markings added by scribes and see how the saints who have gone before chose to interpret the ambiguity, but there's no guarantee that one interpretation is right or wrong. The sequence of Hebrew consonants that we traditionally translate as "I will dwell in," in Psalm 23, for instance, could also have meant "I will return to," which carries a significantly different meaning when talking about "the house of the Lord." If the house of the Lord is Heaven, for example, does returning mean that we were there before we inhabited this earthly life? "Dwell" certainly raises fewer theological quandaries!

Discussion Questions

Try reciting the final verse of Psalm 23 with "return to" in place of "dwell in." Does it change the meaning for you? How so? Which do you prefer, and why?

Revelation 7:9-17

⁹ 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, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb!”

¹¹ And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² singing,

“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” ¹⁴ I said to him, “Sir, you are the one who knows.” Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

¹⁵ For this reason 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.

¹⁶ They will hunger no more and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat,

¹⁷ for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Commentary from Molly Cooke

We’ve been assuming the metaphor of shepherd for Christ for this week’s readings, but in this passage from Revelation, he’s also characterized as the capital-L Lamb! The last verse (17) paints a confusing picture in which the Lamb is also shepherd, and this is par for the course in the topsy-turvy imagery of Revelation. The Lamb’s blood has also been used to wash robes white, which is, uh, not the color we typically think of blood being.

The fact that we can think of Jesus as both Lamb and shepherd is telling. It reflects something about Christ’s nature as both fully God and fully human (the fancy theology term for this is “hypostatic union”). The shepherd metaphor reminds us of his deity and power to care for and guide us while the Lamb imagery reminds us of the vulnerability of his human incarnation: if human beings are his sheep, he is also The Sheep.

Discussion Questions

There are many metaphors we use to make sense of what God is like, many but not all of which are from Scripture (e.g. “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”). What metaphors do you use for God? What do you imagine God looks, sounds, or feels like? What might these imaginings tell you about God’s nature?

John 10:22-30

²² At that time the Festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³ and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. ²⁴ So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” ²⁵ Jesus answered, “I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me, ²⁶ but you do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep. ²⁷ My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, in regard to what he has given me, is greater than all, and no one can snatch them out of the Father’s hand. ³⁰ The Father and I are one.”

Commentary from Molly Cooke

The festival of the Dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem (or, Hanukkah), which serves as the backdrop for this scene in the Gospel of John, was a big deal, to say the least. It was celebrating how, not long before, in 164 BCE, the Temple was rededicated after its desecration by King Antiochus IV of the Seleucid Empire (1 Macc. 4:52-59). During this time, and in the Second Temple period more broadly, the Temple was the center of ancient Jewish faith and life and a holy site of pilgrimage.

Jesus’ confrontation in this chapter is more serious in some ways than others that we see him have with Pharisees and priests throughout the Gospels. By claiming to be one with God the Father, he was committing what would have been considered a heresy at the time, and he was doing it in the holiest place there was at a time when that holiness was being celebrated. Meanwhile, under Roman occupation, fear abounded about further threats to the Temple’s ongoing existence. It was indeed not long for this world. In 70 CE, the Romans would destroy the Temple for good, and the Jewish people would learn to survive and worship in diaspora, hoping, along with many Christians, for a future third Temple. In the midst of this anxious tension, Jesus, like a good shepherd, promised that his sheep would have eternal life, and no one would be able to snatch them out of his hand. This stood in stark contrast to a very reasonable concern the Jewish people had about their ongoing life and the life of their Temple.

Discussion Questions

Jesus promises us everlasting spiritual life in him, but he doesn’t promise that the things we hold dear and think important now will be eternal. What is something that feels essential to your faith now? What would it be like to go without it?