

Sermon - Easter 4 - Year A
Good Shepherd Sunday
4/30/23

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In New York City off the coast of the Bronx, there is an island in the Long Island Sound. Hart Island is a burial ground. It is a Potter's Field where the city buries what it calls the "unclaimed dead." For decades, Hart Island has been the final resting place of hundreds of the people that the rest of society tries to forget: the homeless. Drug addicts. Prisoners. Criminals. Immigrants. People whose lives were marked by exploitation and abuse. The very poor. The ones whom no one remembered. For a long time, the grave markers were blank - just small pieces of stone to indicate the presence of a body beneath the ground. In the last few decades, the city has taken to using a numbering system, doing their best to include what little information they might have in a database in case some long lost family member hopes to look for someone. Everyone buried on Hart Island is a number.

If you visit Hart Island, however, and if you proceed through the acres of anonymous remembrance, you will find something else there. Along a certain path, around a certain curve in the hill, you'll find a statue there of an angel. The angel spreads its wings outward over the potter's field, and on the base of the statue, there is an inscription: *he knows them each by name.*

To the passerby, it might seem like the grave of an unknown body is known only by emptiness, perhaps a number. But the Good Shepherd calls each one of his sheep by name. He *knows* them. He knows them in their fullness – in their childhoods, in what they hoped to be when they grew up, in the way that they laughed. He knows them in the circumstances that made them afraid, in the decisions they made or had made for them that separated them from the ones

who gave them their names, the ones who first taught them to write it. He *knows them*. Even if everyone else has forgotten.

In the Gospels, we find a sort of Trinitarian imagery that Jesus uses to describe himself. He is the Good Shepherd, the one who leaves the 99 sheep of the flock to pursue the single creature who has wandered astray. As the psalm proclaims, “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.” He is also the gate of the sheepfold, as St. John tells us today. He is the one who protects the sheep in the pasture, providing nourishment and shelter and protection from the thieves and bandits outside. And he is also the Lamb - the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world - the one led to the slaughter and offered as sacrifice for all that has ever threatened to separate humanity from God. He is the Shepherd, the Gate, and the Lamb.

In our distance from the first apostles, it can be easy to miss how revolutionary these words of Jesus were then and continue to be for us today. When Israel looked for the Messiah, they kept their eyes open for a warrior king. They were waiting for royalty, and after all they had suffered, it’s understandable, I think, that they longed for the Messiah to be a conqueror of their enemies. And so it was shocking to hear this man, Jesus, who called himself the Messiah to the Samaritan woman at the well – it was scandalous that his kingly power had come to Israel by means of a sheepfold. He came not with vengeance and the sword, but with green pastures and sweet, living water.

A conventional king might know only whether we are strong or weak, or whether we are someone in power whose life is admired. A mighty conqueror might know us if we are strong and healthy and young and rich. A powerful politician might know us if we are able to do something for him, to be useful for his ambition or legacy. But Jesus Christ came to us as a

different sort of royalty. He walks among us as shepherd, the one whose voice we hear and know ourselves to be beloved. Our lives are precious to him, whether we are weak or strong or young or old or wealthy or very poor. As the statue of the angel proclaims, “*he knows us each by name.*”

A great portion of the life of faith is attuning our hearts to hear our own name on the lips of Jesus. It is the work of a lifetime, but it began before the beginning of time. I think of the words from another psalm - psalm 139: “LORD, you have searched me out and known me; * you know my sitting down and my rising up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You trace my journeys and my resting-places * and are acquainted with all my ways...If I climb up to heaven, you are there; * if I make the grave my bed, you are there also. If I take the wings of the morning * and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, Even there your hand will lead me * and your right hand hold me fast.”

These are not the words of a conquering king. This is the song of a shepherd. This is the song of one who walks through the darkness of a potter’s field and calls to each soul by their own name, welcoming them into the banquet of heaven. This is the song of the one who assures us: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

There are times in our own lives where we feel as empty and forgotten as an unmarked grave. Lord knows how we struggle to remember our dignity sometimes in a world that gives us numbers instead of names. But Jesus is our Good Shepherd, unshakable, wise and kind. Our names are on his lips and in his heart, and we are never beyond the sheepfold of his perfect love. Your name is his eternal song. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow you, all the days of your life, and you will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Amen.

