

## We Are His

### 3 Easter, year C - John 21:1-19

*preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson April 21, 2013*

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! [The Lord is risen, indeed! Alleluia!]

At Saints, Sinners and Cynics last Tuesday, we had a couple of people who were excited about the possibility of organizing a trip to the Holy Land to see the places we read about every Sunday. I got a chance to be at St. George's College in Jerusalem in the spring of 2004 with a group from the North American Conference of Cathedral Deans. It was a wonderful, faith-filled journey for this Christian, and the always unsettled politics of the area notwithstanding, I'd recommend it to *any* of you. So if anyone would like to help *organize* such a trip for St. Paul's, just let me know and we'll get the ball rolling. I'd dearly *love* to go again and share all that history and theology and... blessing with my friends.

One afternoon during my pilgrimage, on a side trip out of Jerusalem, our group had the opportunity to experience the Israeli checkpoints you've heard about over the years. I always thought it was a shame that people had to put up with the hassle of such security measures, but I could never really understand why so many Palestinians were always griping about the inconvenience of checkpoint, until I saw one up close and personal. Imagine the daily traffic on 41 being slowed down to a single lane and stopped for each car and each truck to be individually checked by soldiers armed with automatic weapons.

Anyway, as we were stuck in the politically mandated gridlock, our Palestinian driver suggested that we disembark from our tour bus to wait out our turn at the checkpoint, taking in the big picture from atop a little rise next to the road. The moment we got to the top of the rise, we were joined by a small mob of children, selling gum, and postcards, and sodas, and best of all on that warmish day, popsicles, all for, "one dollar American." I wondered, for neither the first time nor the last, whether our driver was in cahoots with the young gang of vendors. Before I was finished with my popsicle, my attention shifted to a small draw on the other side of the hill, where a small flock of sheep was being watched over by an old man who sat with what I at first assumed to be his twelve or thirteen year old son, maybe even a grandson, from the looks of them.

You know, I was a little shocked when I first saw the sheep in the Holy Land. As you've heard me say before, back in my youth, I had the (ahem) *opportunity* to get to know quite a bit about sheep. While working on our friends' farm, I got to know *Suffolk* sheep, and *Dorset* sheep, and *Hampshire* sheep. But *these* woolly, shaggy, kind of dirty looking things were *waaaay* outside my experience. There must have been about twenty or twenty-five motley looking beasts in this flock, mostly sheep, but with a few even shaggier looking goats thrown in for good measure. Some were kind of a dirty white. Some were more an even dirtier brown. But most seemed to be a little of both. I was fascinated to see that each of them was marked with a little patch of color up by their head, a little spot of either red or blue.

As they sat there in the shade of a little scrub, the old man waved a thin branch, what my Moma would have called a switch. The boy, on the other hand, was armed with a big stick that was smoothed in a way that made it obvious that it was a part of his everyday toolkit. I don't know if that stick was his rod or his staff, but it looked like a pretty formidable weapon, especially against the wolves in the Holy Land, which are more the size of the coyotes we have here.

When our driver came by to round us up to continue our journey, I asked him about the markings on the flock. "Oh," he said, "that's *two* flocks." "The old man knows which sheep are his, of course. And the boy knows which are *his*. But if someone *else* gets in the middle of things, like those soldiers, maybe, the markings let *everyone* know what sheep belong to the shepherd."

Almost on cue, the boy stood up, whistled, and shouted, "Kharoof!" (Arabic for "sheep!") Now, all the *red*-tagged beasts kept nibbling whatever it was they were nibbling, *I* certainly didn't see

anything worth eating down there. But every shaggy *blue*-tinted head immediately popped up from the milling woolly mass, and as they sorted themselves from their brethren, they followed their shepherd further up the draw and out of sight over the next ridge. This preacher was left standing there, again surrounded by diminutive salespeople, and thinking, “that’s going to make a great sermon illustration one of these days.”

“My sheep hear my voice,” Jesus said, “I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. *No* one will snatch them out of my hand.”

It only makes basic sense to say that, as Christians, we belong *to Christ*. With a few splashes of water, you were made clean, forgiven of every sin, every stain, and better yet, freed from the chains that *bound* you to sin. With a few prayers and a few promises, you became a full and real part of the Body of Christ, the fellowship and the family of all faithful people. With a smudge of oil and a whispered “amen,” you were marked as Christ’s own... forever, dead to death, and alive to be everything that you were created to be – no more and no less than a child of the Living God of Creation.

We are *his*. We belong to *him*. With the price of Christ’s own blood, we have been bought from the bondage of sin and death. We have been placed into Christ’s own nail-scarred hands, and he has pledged that nothing, *nothing* will snatch us out of those hands! Not the rambling of our hearts, nor the wondering of our wills. Not storms from the skies above, nor storms from the oceans within. Not terrorists’ bombs, nor lunatics’ poisons, nor the explosive combination of fuel and flame. Not heights, nor depths, nor any other creature in heaven or earth, can separate us from the love of the good shepherd that knows us and calls us each by name. The hands that calmed the raging sea, that broke the bread, and held the cup, those strong and gentle hands *still* hold *every* lamb of his flock, through *whatever* storms may come.

But we need to *listen* to the voice of our shepherd. When everything around us *shouts* to us of fear and rage and revenge, our shepherd says again, “Peace, be still.” “Love one another as I have loved you.” When the seemingly ceaseless stream of static murmurs with a single voice that we should grab what we can, that we should look out for number one, that we should think of our own needs and desires and comforts because no one else will, our shepherd reminds us, “You are *mine*. You *must* be a servant.” When the whole world seems to whisper that we should keep our heads down, and just keep nibbling at this worthless pursuit, at that empty entertainment, at this piece of gossip, or that piece of hatred, our shepherd calls again to those of us who are his to listen to *him*, to follow *him*, home to green pastures, home to still waters, home to a table set by grace and love, overflowing with goodness and with mercy.

We’re a shaggy, motley looking flock, to be sure. But we are *his* shaggy, motley looking flock. We are, “greater than all else,” he said. In his love, *you* are precious, and *you* are safe, and *you* are *his*.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! [The Lord is risen, indeed! Alleluia!]