

Through the written word and the spoken word may we know your living word, Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen

Good morning.

I have to be honest; it is an odd feeling to be standing here on this side of the altar. I was baptized, had my first communion, and was confirmed in the Episcopal church. I went to retreats at camp Washington, did an all nighter night watch in the cathedral of St John the divine in NYC, I was an acolyte... but I never dreamed that one day I would stand here and give a sermon.

I want to first thank you for the hospitality that you have shown to Ekklesia Contemporary Ballet. For me personally, being here in your beautiful space at Church of the Holy Trinity has brought me one of those special and rare “full circle” life moments. Bringing my life experiences of church and dance and study together in ways I never could have dreamed. I studied modern dance throughout my younger years. In college I dabbled with dance while turning my attention to Biblical studies and theology. After college I married and began raising my family – danced a little, studied the Bible a little more. About 14 years ago the three came back together when I met Elisa Schroth. I began dancing again – in fact even my children got involved with the dance school and company. It wasn’t until about 4 or 5 years ago that we all recognized that our work as a dance company would have a deeper foundation if we included a theological understanding to our work – and the three chords of my life began to become a cohesive braid. And now, here I am, back in the Episcopal church and the circle seems complete.

One theologian I studied put what Elisa and I discovered into words. He wrote, “Art needs theology and theology needs art. Theology needs art because art teaches theology to see. And art needs theology because theology not only can guide and encourage art to look for the beautiful in the depths of the human mystery but can also help art regain its communal dimensions through which the beautiful shines through the violence and pain of this troubled world.”<sup>1</sup> I think these words create the perfect frame for the work that we are all about to embark on together in this next year as we open this grant to explore “Body and Land”... but I am not going to engage the art of dance this morning.

I want, instead, to look at our scripture readings for this morning through the art of storytelling and poetry. After all, those are the artforms that the biblical writers used most often.

One of the things that I have learned during my seminary studies is that the Bible is always in conversation with itself. I have learned that although the study of particular texts is important, there is a fullness to each text when it is read in the context of the over all story that God is telling through the scope of the entire story of God and his people – that is the entire Bible.

So, this morning we have read what sounds to me like bookends of a theme... A forward and an afterword. We could read Jeremiah as the introduction... Once upon a time there were shepherds who had not tended the sheep of God’s pasture – who had instead scattered them. Jeremiah also casts a vision of a day when shepherds will be raised up who will tend the flock in such a way that God’s sheep will no longer feel fear or dismay, and none will be missing.

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<sup>1</sup> Garcia-Rivera, Alejandro, *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art*, (Collegeville, The Liturgical Press, 2003), 6.

Jeremiah even mentions a righteous branch from David's line who will be known as "The Lord is our righteousness."

our second reading is like the afterword... this is what the flock will look like in the end. Paul is describing a gathered flock – God's flock will not only be made up of the Hebrew people, now even those who were far off – the aliens to the Israelite people, strangers to the covenant of promise – have been brought near. The great shepherd of God's flock, Christ, has made both groups into one and has broken the dividing walls and the hostility between us.

But how does this happen?

Oh! How I long for that – the breaking of the dividing walls - all that hostility between us gone! I don't know about you, but sometimes I feel like the world around me feels like a maze of dividing walls that I must constantly navigate. Oh, for a shepherd to gather us all together so that we may not feel the fear or dismay. Is that even possible?

The story that we are hearing this morning connects these two pictures, it does not leave us with this abstract concept of good shepherds and wicked shepherds and some ideal flock of peaceful happy sheep.

In our gospel reading from Mark, we meet Jesus. He is gathering many different people, there are crowds of people needing food and healing everywhere Jesus and the disciples turn. And we are told that Jesus saw them as sheep without a shepherd and he had compassion on them, feeding them and healing them. Jesus is the good shepherd!

What we heard this morning were the portions of the gospel of Mark that come right before Jesus feeds the five thousand and right after he walks across the water to rejoin his disciples that night. What we notice most about Jesus is his great compassion and skill at shepherding.

But I want to paint an even more detailed picture from this chapter of the story that is told in Mark 6. Remember theology needs art to help us to see.... Storytelling is an art.

We heard that Jesus had meant to take his disciples to a quiet space to rest. They had just returned after their first ministry trip, having been sent out in pairs to practice what Jesus had been showing them about the kingdom of God. They had gone out without Jesus. I am sure they were full of tales they wanted to tell. And the people they met had followed them back to where Jesus had been waiting for them and no matter where they went or how hard Jesus and his disciples had tried to find a quiet place to debrief and rest, the crowds were pressing in on them.

But there is even more context for this passage. At the very beginning of this chapter of Mark we learn that Jesus had just left his hometown where he had been rejected as a prophet and a teacher. Verses 5 and 6 tell us that he could do no miracles there and he was amazed at their lack of faith. I used to read this and think that Jesus must have been stoic about it all. But if I place myself right there with Jesus, as a skilled storyteller would draw their audience right into a story in a way that engages all of their senses, I begin to think that Jesus must have been pretty aware of his feelings, and I wonder if he felt some sadness.

A few verses later in this chapter, the gospel writer paints a change of scene. We are no longer following Jesus or his disciples, we are given a glimpse into Herod's palace, and we read about

the demise of John the Baptist. In the parallel passage from Matthew's gospel, we learn that this is when Jesus was told that John the Baptist was dead. It is at this point that the twelve disciples return from their ministry practicum and Jesus begins to seek a quiet place for them only to be surrounded by the needy crowds.

I can't help but wonder if Jesus is feeling any fear or dismay like the sheep in the Jeremiah passage. After all, he has just experienced the rejection of the people he had grown up with and just found out that his own cousin has been brutally murdered.

And yet, Jesus sees the crowds and has compassion on them because he sees them as sheep without a shepherd.

Now I don't know about you, but if I was in Jesus' shoes, rejected by my hometown, having just heard the news of my cousin's violent and unjust demise and simply wanting some time alone, I am not sure that I would be able to have compassion on a crowd of people who needed healing and feeding. I might have been one of those shepherds who couldn't tend a flock at that moment.

We meet Jesus as he shepherds... But I also think we meet Jesus as he lets himself be shepherded. In the gospel of John, Jesus tells his disciples that he is the way, the truth and the life. Yes, by his death and resurrection he has made a way for us to God, but the way he lived also shows us the way to live. And the way to shepherd?

Right after Jesus feeds the 5000, he puts his disciples in a boat and he goes up on a mountainside to pray. I can easily imagine that the words of our Psalm this morning are on his lips as he prays.

“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; \*

The Psalms are poetry that God has given to us. One Biblical scholar writes, “The psalter is the only part of the bible that is clearly formulated as human speech, packaged and ready to be put directly into our mouths.”<sup>2</sup>

I am sure Jesus knew Psalm 23 by heart. David had been a shepherd of sheep before he had become a shepherd of the people of Israel – often kings and rulers were referred to as shepherds in the Ancient Near East. And during that time out in the wilderness and fields David had learned to use the art of poetry to share his heart with God and to learn to hear God speak to him.

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<sup>2</sup> Davis, Ellen F., *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 2001), 9.

Poetry is another artform that can help us to see. In fact, did you know that when James writes in his epistle, “be doers of the word and not hearers only” the Greek word for Doer is *poietaes* ... which is where the word *Poet* comes from. So, we are to be poets of the word... like David, Like Jesus.

So how do we become poets... for I am sure that I will never learn to weave words together like Shakespeare, TS Eliot, or Amanda Gorman, or David for that matter.

Wendell Berry, a writer, environmentalist, and poet wrote a poem which addresses this very question:

### **How to Be a Poet**

BY WENDELL BERRY

*(to remind myself)*

i

Make a place to sit down.  
Sit down. Be quiet.  
You must depend upon  
affection, reading, knowledge,  
skill—more of each  
than you have—inspiration,  
work, growing older, patience,  
for patience joins time  
to eternity. Any readers  
who like your poems,  
doubt their judgment.

ii

Breathe with unconditional breath  
the unconditioned air.  
Shun electric wire.  
Communicate slowly. Live  
a three-dimensional life;  
stay away from screens.  
Stay away from anything  
that obscures the place it is in.  
There are no unsacred places;  
there are only sacred places  
and desecrated places.

iii

Accept what comes from silence.  
Make the best you can of it.  
Of the little words that come  
out of the silence, like prayers  
prayed back to the one who prays,  
make a poem that does not disturb  
the silence from which it came.

I think that Jesus would have especially liked Wendell Berry's poem that evening as he finally sat down on the mountainside to pray.

Returning to our story, we have heard that there are shepherds who have forgotten how to tend God's sheep with wisdom, justice and righteousness and have instead scattered them. We have heard that there will be a day when the flock will be regathered and those who are both near and far off will be sought out and brought together as one flock in Christ Jesus. And we have met this Jesus who, though he was tired, and dismayed, and walking through the valley of the shadow of death himself, was able to have compassion on and took care of and gathered the crowds around them meeting their needs. Yet the passage we heard this morning from Jeremiah told us not only of one great shepherd but of shepherds that will be raised up. We must also become shepherds just as Jesus demonstrated for us.

To conclude this morning, I would like to introduce you to someone who has learned what David and Jesus knew about "doing" the word, how practicing being a "poet of the word" can help us to see the way of compassion through this time of conflict with its walls of division that we seem to encounter at each turn.

John Paul Lederach is well known for his conflict transformation and peacebuilding work in Columbia, the Philippines, Nepal, and countries in East and West Africa. Lederach uses haiku to help him make sense of the profound and complicated challenges of these situations in ways that move away from the splintering and scattering of "us versus them" or "me first" responses. He says Haiku forces him to pause and notice the environment around him... Much like the writer of Psalm 23 has done... "He makes me lie down in green pastures, leads me beside still waters". In the same way that Wendell Berry implores us to "stay away from anything that obscures the place that it is in."

Here is how John Paul Lederach responded to the impending tumult of the covid pandemic

An 'Unfolding Poem' for the Moment We're In<sup>3</sup>

**John Paul Lederach**

*march fourteen, 'twenty*

On December 31, 2019, Chinese officials alerted the World Health Organization to an unknown form of pneumonia emerging in the city of Wuhan.

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<sup>3</sup> [www.beyondintractability.org/ci-mpi-cv19-blog1/lederach](http://www.beyondintractability.org/ci-mpi-cv19-blog1/lederach)

They suspected a new virus.

At the time, I did not hear this news. But the news and the newness came finding us.

It spreads like that.

I take haiku like vitamins, one-a-day. My vitamin Awe.

It's an anti-viral thing.

Haiku are nature bound, yet the 5-7-5 always weaves a delicate human filament. Through this frailest of poetic webs, newness outside flows into newness inside and then back out again.

It's a membrane thing.

Newness requires noticing and in noticing humanness begins.

It's a compassion thing.

These days our frail membrane tries to remember forward. Remembering forward requires we keep our frail filaments soft and supple.

It's a summoning thing.

This is his Haiku...

they say we're at war  
i think we're falling in love  
with the human race

**I think I hear a shepherd's call.... Amen.**