

Readings: Acts 9:36-43; Psalm 23; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

Grace and peace to you from the God of Easter, the God of Resurrection, the God of New Life. Amen.

Easter rolls on, like a thunderstorm rolling through these Hills. In this fifty-day season of Easter, today is as close as a Sunday comes to the middle – they very center of the Easter season. And as we survey the readings, we might feel a little like being in the middle – the eye of a storm.

You know, don't you, about the so-called "eye" – this place of relative calm in the middle of a storm? I was surprised to find out that in large storms like hurricanes, the eye is often 20-30 miles wide, but can be as big as 40-50 miles. And there, in the midst of this turbulent storm with its winds in the hundreds of miles per hour and torrential rains and swirling clouds... there at the eye of the storm, there is a calm in the center – with gentle winds, no rain, and often, even clear, blue skies.

I wonder if the Easter season isn't a little like this. That first Easter Sunday, with the chaos and confusion of the empty tomb not knowing what hit you like the storm first hitting shore. Then, last week, Pastor Tom, compared the Easter readings for that Sunday (the story of Paul and Saul and Ananias) to a middle school track meet – from a bird's-eye-view, total chaos, with dramas swirling around here-and-there, sometimes crashing into one another.

But this week, the "eye of the storm." It's sometimes called "Good Shepherd Sunday" – this Sunday when we hear Psalm 23:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want.
The Lord makes me lie down in green pastures
And leads me beside still waters.

I know that in a chaotic and confusing world, Psalm 23 has literally been a place where Christians have time and time again taken refuge. Like resting in the very center – the very eye of a storm.

And then again, in our Gospel reading for today from chapter ten of John's Gospel, Jesus offers words of comfort that echo the psalm: "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me...No one will snatch them out of my hand."

I don't know if you're interested in these things, but you know that here in the church, we live and move and have our being in a three-year cycle of readings, it's called the lectionary. Incidentally, we get other words like *lectern* (the name for this piece of furniture from which we read) and *lecture* (the name for an event where someone reads a speech for a long time... *feel free to insert joke about falling asleep from my lecture on the lectionary here at the lectern*). Anyway, all these words (lecture, lectern and lectionary) all come from the same root word that simply means "to read."

But back to this three-year cycle of readings – the lectionary. With most readings you have to wait three years to hear them again. But I was curious, so I checked, and wouldn't you know it, every Fourth Sunday of Easter (this middle Sunday of Easter) we hear Psalm 23. And every year, along with Psalm 23 we hear one part of chapter 10 of John's Gospel – this chapter where Jesus gives this long lecture about sheep and shepherding.

If you go home and read the entire 10th chapter from John's Gospel, you'll hear Jesus say, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Hence, "Good Shepherd Sunday..." And, like many of the "I am..." statements in John's Gospel, these promises can be for us like the calm, the peace and protection in the midst of a chaotic story full of plotting and scheming, betrayal, even murder.

But enough with my lecture on the lectionary... What does this mean, right? What does this have to do with faith or life, God, Jesus or the bible?

Well, it would be nice to say that to be a Christian is to always live in the eye of the storm. That all you have to do is 'have a little faith' – trust and believe – and your journey through this thing called 'life' will be like always staying in the calm, peaceful, protected eye of the storm.

...that the stormy chaos and confusion of life will swirl around, but won't curl a hair of your head. That depression and death, divorce and disagreement will always stay at arms length if only you work hard enough at it. I don't know about you, but as a Christian, as a follower of Christ, this has not always been my experience. And I've known some folks I would call, "pretty faithful," but one of the few things we've all got in common is that we all get tossed around by the storm of life from time to time.

Just like Psalm 23 is one of the psalms in the bible, but certainly not the only one... protection/calm/peace is one of the promises of God, but it's not the only one... this is one of the places we find ourselves sometimes in, but certainly not the only one...

The God we worship is not just the God of the eye of the storm, but of all creation... The God we worship is not just the God of the 23rd Psalm or the Fourth Sunday of Easter, but of the whole bible and of all time. And the wind and the rain falls on the righteous (the good) parts of our lives as well as the unrighteous (the bad).

“Now in Joppa there was a disciple...” we hear in our reading from Acts. “...a disciple whose name was Tabitha... She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. At that time she became ill and died.”

There’s a lot here in these first three sentences of our first reading from Acts today. We could talk about how Tabitha is the only named female disciple in the entire New Testament. Or we might want to talk about the women in our lives who have been “devoted to good works and acts of charity...” the Tabithas that we have known. Then again, perhaps it invites us to speak against the grain of some of the other readings and use this reading to speak of the times when illness or death has knocked on our door or the door of a loved one.

You know, you don’t have to stop breathing to die, right? Most of us, all of us die a little bit each day, some days more than others. Call it depression or divorce or disagreement. Or call it a “little death” in the middle of living.

And you know, don’t you, what’s right next to (what’s just outside) the eye of the storm? The “eye” gets its name from what it looks like from a bird’s-eye-view. But right outside of this eye of peaceful, calm, protected center is what meteorologists call the “eyewall.”

Encircling this relative calm is a wall of looming thunder clouds, the most severe part of the storm – the highest winds, the most rain, the thickest clouds.

Trying to be faithful, trying to follow Christ, trying to believe in the Good News of the Easter season can be a little like trying to live always in the middle of the eye of the storm of life. When you take this work upon yourself, at first, it’s kind of exciting. The hard work, devoting yourself to good works and acts of charity.

There’s nothing per se wrong with this. In fact, there can be something intoxicating about trying to stay in God’s good grace, about working hard to stay in good relationship with one another... stay on top of everything at work or school... again, it’s a little like trying to stay in the eye of a storm.

But storms don't stay in one place, do they? The storm almost always moves. And life has a way of moving on without us, doesn't it? Just when we think we've got this storm of life figured out, the winds blow a different direction and we hit up against the eyewall.

Illness or death knocks on your door. The winds of divorce or depression knock you over. A simple disagreement spins out of control and turns into a tornado of a conflict or we simply feel 'out of relationship' with God. Take your pick or add your own.

Certainly, we give thanks today for moments of calm, peace and the promise of God's protection. We give thanks for moments of grace like still waters, like the eye of the storm that can be life. We give thanks for the refuge that God provides through promises like we read in the 23rd Psalm.

But make no mistake on this center day of Easter, if we are talking about "central things," make no mistake that the central things that give us life: grace and forgiveness – the good news of the resurrection – all these things are not about how hard we work. Faith (our part) is less about you or me working to stay on the straight and narrow in the center.

Does this mean we don't work at it? By no means. But if you know anything, know that the work of faith is often more about letting go... If anything, our part is about being a sheep and for Christ's sake letting the shepherd do the shepherding.

And when we hit up against the eyewall and it spins us out of control, knowing that God is the God of everything. Of the cross and of the empty tomb. Of Easter and of every other season of change. Of life and of death.

It is because these things we call grace and forgiveness are up to God that we can let them go and then receive them. It is because transformation is up to God that we can let new life come where and when it may, like the eye of a storm showing up when we least expect it. Like Tabitha, sitting up, after a prayer no better than the ones we pray every day, this prayer that hardly seems capable, let alone worthy of bringing someone back to life.

So as you sit here today, whether you feel more like you are in the eye of the storm or the turbulent eyewall, whether you feel more like you are lying down in green pastures or walking through the very valley of the shadow of death, or if you are somewhere in between... know that you are the sheep of God's pasture. And God will not fail to bring back to life all those places where you are all but dead. Thanks be to God. Amen.