North Kildonan United Church

30th April 2023 ~*Rev. Don Johnson*

Acts 2: 42-47 | Psalm 23 | John 10: 1-10

Gracious God, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may hear your Word with joy. Amen.

Many years ago, actually more than a few decades ago, I was asked to conduct a funeral for a person with no church connections. Not an unusual request for me or indeed for most clergy so I agreed to do so.

I was invited by the family to their home to discuss the service and more importantly to gain some sense of the life and values and interests of the deceased.

The home was a large two storey building in the West Broadway area. It was a standard home for that neighbourhood, built at the beginning of the 20th century and now I was visiting it in the mid-1990s.

But once I crossed the threshold and entered the house, all sense of being in just another standard home disappeared. For the Dr. Who fans who might be here today, it was like entering the Tardis and going back in time.

This home had belonged to the same family since it was built. As we sat in the living room, I looked around and imagined that I was in the 1920s. The furniture and light fixtures were of that era, as was the carpeting, and the entire room was well-appointed and without modern inventions such as a TV. There may have been a radio somewhere but I wasn't aware of it.

After we made the necessary arrangements for the funeral, the widow told me a bit about the history of the house. Her grandfather had been a Lutheran minister and he bought the home at the turn of the century. Some years later, I don't remember when exactly, the church he was serving ordered a series of stained glass windows from France, to be installed in the church. And as a kind gesture, the stained glass company included, for free, a stained glass window for the minister's home. "Would I like to see it?" asked the widow.

So she took me to the window. We went up a few steps to the first landing and above the landing was the window. It was clearly designed for a home because it was no larger than about 2 feet wide and 3 feet tall, not the massive stained glass windows usually found in churches, such as our marvellous Leo Mol window. But it was also clearly designed for a minister's home because the subject of the glass was a beautiful, gentle lamb. I don't remember if there was an inscription in the glass, but the meaning was clear without a text.

I've often thought about that window and wondered if the home was still with the original family or if it was sold, and what might have happened to that French gem of a stained glass window in what is admittedly a fairly rough part of the city.

Today is the fourth Sunday of Easter, Good Shepherd Sunday as it is called, and the focus of the lessons, music and prayers is on Jesus as our Shepherd. Each 4th Sunday of Easter, in the three year lectionary cycle we use, has a passage from the 10th chapter of John's gospel and the psalm is always the 23rd, this day read from the King James Version: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters."

The window I saw that day only had the lamb but there are countless beautiful depictions of today's gospel, in words and music and stained glass and art of all sorts, of Jesus lovingly holding a helpless lamb in his arms or over his shoulders. We will close our service this day with Henry William Baker's wonderful paraphrase of Psalm 23, The King of Love, as we sing: "Perverse and foolish oft I strayed; but yet in love he sought me, And on his shoulder gently laid, and home rejoicing brought me."

The lamb safe in the arms of Jesus is a powerful and comforting image. In today's gospel, Jesus speaks about the shepherd who protects the flock. The shepherd he speaks of calls the sheep his own, calls them by name and leads them to pasture in safety. This shepherd has only the best interests of the flock at heart, and Jesus contrasts this attitude of care with the thieves and bandits who only want to steal and mislead the sheep.

It is well worth noting that just before today's reading, in the 9th chapter of John, we find the story of the gift of sight to the blind man. We heard that lesson, all 45 verses of it, on one of the Sundays in Lent. That lesson ends with Jesus basically telling the Pharisees that through their narrowness and lack of grace, they are basically blind. Since our reading follows that one, it is quite possible that Jesus is naming the Pharisees and others as the thieves and bandits who are harming God's flock.

In his commentary on today's gospel, Tom Wright speaks of his experience of watching Middle Eastern shepherds at work with their flocks. He writes: "To this day, in the Middle East, a shepherd will go into a crowded sheepfold and call out his own sheep one by one, naming them. They will recognize his voice and come to him. The shepherd, after all, spends most hours of most days in their company. He knows their individual characters, markings, likes and dislikes. What's more, they know him. They know his voice. Someone else can come to the sheepfold and they won't go near him, even if he calls the right names. They are listening for the one voice that matters, the voice they trust. When they hear it, he won't need a sheepdog to keep them in order. He won't walk behind them, driving them on. He will will walk ahead, calling them, and they will follow him. I've seen it done", says Tom Wright.

In the gospel, Jesus says that the sheep follow the shepherd because they know his voice and they trust his voice. This is important, very important.

Years ago, in a discussion with some colleagues, one of them asked the question- whose voice are you listening to? There are so many voices around us, so many opinions, so many different attitudes, so many options. What is real, what is true, what is best for our lives?

We are living in a time when truth is sometimes hard to find. Or to put it another way, lies and falsehoods are dressed up as facts, like a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Think for instance of the statements that still come out of the Russian government justifying their invasion of Ukraine. Their distortions are not worth repeating, but for many Russians, whose sole source of information is from State television and they believe what they hear, the battle against Ukraine has almost a holy war tone to it, a righteous campaign to bring the wayward misled Ukrainians back to Mother Russia. All the more reason for us to continue to light the Ukraine candle and to hold the Ukrainian people in our prayers and in our hearts.

Lies come in subtle and not so subtle forms. Not all that long ago the world witnessed the use of "alternative facts" by a former President of the United States. At the time, one person wrote: "The worst of the four classification of lies: lies, damned lies, statistics, alternative facts. Alternative facts are distinguished from the other damnable lies by the addition of gaslighting the listener." And they give an example:

After backing up her false statements with alternative facts, Kellyanne Conway threatened the "dishonest" media for suggesting that she might be lying.

Truth, not "my truth" as so many like to say, but real truth is so vitally important in these days. Timothy Snyder, a professor of history at Yale University, could see the potential danger to democracy if a certain republican was elected president. He wrote a brilliant, brief book entitled <u>On Tyranny, Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century.</u> He could see strong parallels of the Trump presidency with the various forms of fascism of the last century. Each of his lessons begins with a short statement. One lesson is "Believe in Truth". He says: "To abandon facts is to abandon freedom. If nothing is true, then no one can criticize power, because there is no basis upon which to do so. If nothing is true, then all is spectacle. The biggest wallet pays for the most blinding lights."

But let's come back to the gospel. The Bible uses the picture of a shepherd and the sheep to refer to the king and his people. The ideal king is pictured as a shepherd who intimately knows his people and whose people fully trust him. So we shouldn't be surprised when Jesus presents himself as the true king of Israel, the shepherd who knows and loves his people, who is prepared to lay down his life for their sake. Nor should we be surprised that the thieves and bandits of Jesus's day are still with us, still distorting the truth, still operating at odds to our best interests. How did Jesus put it?

'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Let's end with a few more words from Tom Wright.

"The promise of full life, full to overflowing, is as relevant for us today as it was then. The modern Western world has discovered how unsatisfying materialism really is, and is looking for something more, something beyond. Many thieves have told lies, and have deceived the sheep, stolen them and left them for dead. The call today to Jesus' true sheep is to listen for his voice, and to find in him and him alone the life which is overflowing life indeed." Amen.

Let us pray

God of peace,
who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus,
the great Shepherd of the sheep,
through the blood of an eternal covenant,
make us perfect in goodness
so that we may do your will,
and create in us what is pleasing to you;
through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.