

Sermon April 26, 2015, Easter 4 - Good Shepherd Sunday,
A Very Good Shepherd
Acts 4:1–12



Dear Friends in Christ,
In the name of the Risen Christ, peace and grace be with all of you.

We do live in an era where we don't want to fix things anymore. Something is not working, we get rid of it. We destroy it by disposing of it the best way we can.

The same goes for our relationships when something is not going well we stop communicating with the one or ones whom we do have a problem with. We don't fix problems we just get rid of those who create or are part of the problem.

In some part of the world today politics works very much the same way. Politicians or those in power when faced with strong opponents, they don't talk or come to agreements but they simply kill those who oppose them.

The same with the financial world, sometimes businesses try to kill the competition by whatever means possible.

But this is nothing new! Killing it's actually engrained in the decaying human nature! And more, it is the power by which Satan holds the whole world captive, as Hebrews 2 reminds us (v 14).

Even in the Scriptures we do see people from long ago, doing the same thing. Yes the Scriptures tell us of those stories to show how the human being acts and relates to others in finding solutions for problems they can't handle or they create themselves.

And many, with a lot of power and even perhaps with not much conscience have been tempted to use killing and death against opponents. In the Old Testament we have the example of King Saul whose who was so jealousy of David, the son of Jesse that he persecuted him, wanting to kill him, all because David became so popular among his people. He was delivered though and became king himself, appointed by God for sure.

Sadly, King David himself would later effectively and sinfully use death for political and personal ends. In what would prove to be the lowest point of his life, King David fathered a child with a married woman who was not his wife. Public scandal was sure to follow when news got out. Public repentance was apparently not on David's agenda. And so it naturally occurred to him that he could fix it all . . . if he would only kill Uriah, whose wife David had effectively stolen. And so David did. But soon and sure enough, his conscience was overcome with pain. If you ever have a chance to read psalm 51, please do so for in there you can see what pain he must have gone through that he writes: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions" (v 1). He speaks here of Bathsheba and Uriah.

Of course, these were not the first times death was used conveniently by the powerful, nor would it be the last.

But one thing we must have present is that innocent blood has a way of speaking out and even humbling those who spill it. That was true in the case of Uriah and David. It was also true of Jesus and his persecutors too.

Our text in Acts opens with the Jewish leaders rushing to the temple courts, greatly annoyed and perplexed to find that death had not solved their Jesus problem. Not long ago, they thought they had done away with their Jesus problem. They had killed him! The competition or the opposition was no more. Now things were getting back to what used to be, or so they thought! For today, they discover Peter and John have healed a lame man in Jesus' name, in the name who they had killed. Worse, they are publicly proclaiming Jesus with every breath in their lungs—proclaiming him alive and calling for repentance: “God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness” (Acts 3:26). And to those in power are surprised, because thousands heard and believed.

Now look what those in power did. They resort to the usual tactics of power in the face of opposition, they arrests the preachers. Now the court convenes and a dark cloud of death hangs over Peter and John. Now if we were watching the proceedings in real time, we would go something like... O no! Not again! Poor Peter and John! They are dead! But as it turns out things drastically change because Peter and John are not afraid. For them, death is no longer an issue. When interrogated as to how the lame man standing before them had been healed, Peter boldly explains: “Let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well” (v 10).

Not only had death not solved their Jesus problem, but Jesus also had created for them a problem with death, actually more a life problem. The threat or even the use of death wasn't working, it didn't work. In Christ, death had backfired and unleashed forgiveness, restoration, and life. Here was blood speaking a better word than the blood of Abel, and here was an empty tomb making itself felt even in high, mighty hearts.

How do you control people who aren't afraid to die? All those in power could do was to charge Peter and John to be quiet about Jesus. But Peter and John refuse right out: “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (4:19–20).

How do you feel as you consider all of this? Initially, it's natural to feel excited and encouraged, on the one hand, but on the other hand even feel ashamed. It's easy to feel ashamed at how sheepish we are when such ground for boldness is ours in Christ, yet we don't capitalize on it.

Think of this, I know that the resurrected Good Shepherd is at my side, and I go through life as nervous and shifty eyed as a lone lamb in the woods, worrying away my days. The very vanquisher of death has declared himself through Baptism to be, for me, my deliverer, yet the very mention of some illness or cancer or stroke can make me tremble.

The same David who wrote Psalm 51 after killing Uriah, is the one wrote Psalm 23, and you know what that is all about, the Good Shepherd, that with Him nothing is lacking yet many times I worry about the future as if I was an orphan!

And then there's the idea of persecution. I don't imagine I'll ever be dragged before rulers and authorities and threatened with death if I refuse to get quiet about

Jesus, but such things do happen today. Actually, it was because of persecution—in part, that my family and I are in Canada. I say in part, because in part we left the country because of fear. I know God has a plan for each one of us, and so it is in His plans that we are here, yet fear was what made us leave Guatemala. There are men and women who continue to be men and women who stand up to worldly power and give witness with their lives to the one who is stronger than death. And here I am, sometimes lowering my voice to a whisper when leading a table prayer in public; timid about letting the waiter hear me speak to Jesus asking him to bless my food; here I'm caving in to the voices and petitions of the world and the flesh, rather than God's. Perhaps in your own way, you've felt the same. Have you thought about that? Any fears you have? Any missed opportunities to show for your faith? Any failures? Christ, have mercy on your sheep!

But then we do remember that He has mercy on us. This is also what it means that he is the Good Shepherd—not only that he is infinite in power, unstoppable in death, and able to deliver, but also that this mighty, living Savior, who knew our sin before we were conceived, willingly laid down his life for such timid, sinful sheep as you and I are. “I am the good shepherd,” we heard him say today. “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (Jn 10:11).

Do we appreciate how profound that is? Do we remember who these sheep are of whom Christ speaks? He is talking about David, adulterer and murderer of humble Uriah. He is speaking of Peter, who three times denied him, swearing, “I do not know the man.” He is speaking of John, his disciples who wanted a place of power at the right hand of Christ's throne in His glory. But then the same John locked himself away with the others, despite the Lord's word that death could not contain him. Some flock. But this is who Jesus is, the Good Shepherd who loves the sheep, who pursues the sheep, who lays down his life for his sheep—sheep like you and sheep like me as well!

What sweet Gospel! A shepherd merely infinite in power might strike fear in the now defenseless high and mighty but would not inspire anything like Psalm 23. It is because David had tasted God's infinite mercy and had seen ahead to the one who wields the rod and staff that he found comfort in them and finally walked through the valley of the shadow of death without fear. It is because Peter and John not only saw the resurrected Christ but also had received his restoration and word of peace that they were bold to testify powerfully in his name.

And today dear friends, we too are brought to a challenge, to experience deeply that power of the resurrection. The challenge is right in front of us.

Sure we don't have any persecution where your life is being threatened, at least not yet. We are not being brought before the police or the courts because of our faith, at least not yet, we are not being killed because we are opposing somebody or somethings, here in town, or at least not yet!

But, but what are we waiting for? That we get to that point? Maybe if those kinds of persecutions will happen, then faith will be tried and those who really believe and have faith will be revealed.

But we don't have to wait till then, it is time for us to stop being complacent even in the face of religious freedom, it is time that we would pray “Lord help my unbelief” for we are doubtful of what He can do, but we are doubtful only because we haven't allowed God to do His work in our midst with all his power. But how do we do that?

One word “Believe,” believe in His word of promise, seeking his will, and by laying down our own reason and incapacities in His hand. As our Good Shepherd He knows our weaknesses and failures, and points us to that too, but somehow we don’t want to believe that we have failed, that we do our own things.

Now maybe, maybe we too would want to resort to death to get rid of our opponents...now listen carefully... not that we would kill others, but that we would kill that which opposes us in ourselves, mainly sin. That we would kill sins in us! Luther says: “the old Adam in us should, by daily contrition and repentance, be drowned and die with all sins and evil lusts, and, again, a new man daily come forth and arise; who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever.” (Small Catechism)

Time will only tell how our encounters of the mighty and merciful Good Shepherd will embolden our own lives and witness. But we do know this: In Christ, our Good Shepherd, our sin has a forgive-ness problem and death a life problem, and we . . . well, we have a very Good Shepherd.

And let’s keep in mind what the apostle Paul tells us: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” (Romans 6:3-4)

Thanks be to God!