

Sermon for 5-12-19
Scriptures -- John 10:22-30 & Acts 9:36-43
The Rev. Maggie Leidheiser-Stoddard
Christ Episcopal Church, Springfield OH

I consider it part of my job to be generally positive and encouraging. And it comes naturally, most of the time. But there are days when I feel down, moments when I approach despair. Last week had a few days like that. You know those days when work is so busy, you're juggling too many balls, maybe a few things go wrong and it seems like the hits just keep coming... and then you make the mistake of turning on the news or glancing at the headlines on your phone.

Another school shooting, another threat, another scandal; more division and suspicion, more power struggles at the expense of people's lives. This is reality nowadays, and instead of banding together and doing something about it (or maybe because we don't know how to band together and we can't figure out what to do), we just shake our heads and turn away. It's simply too much to bear.

Days like this make me wonder if I'm living right; if we're living right. Are we really living like Resurrection people? I heard a sermon once about "functional atheists" -- people who go to church and pray the prayers and sing the hymns but live as if Christ's teachings have nothing to do with the rest of their lives. That's not us... is it?

What if a highly intelligent species of alien, completely invisible to all of us, traveled from another solar system to Earth? And what if these invisible aliens just happened to land here in Springfield, Ohio in May 2019, not to conquer or

interfere with us but to study our lives, to observe us and learn our deepest values and core beliefs? If they watched us, for a day or a week or a month, at the end of that time what would they say we believe?

Would they say our lives demonstrate love of God and neighbor, welcome for outcasts, peace and mutuality, gentleness and generosity and honesty and courage? Or do our lives reflect the misguided priorities of a selfish, competitive, power-hungry and image-obsessed culture?

I hope this doesn't sound like scolding. I've always heard that preachers tend to preach the sermons they need to hear themselves... I shudder to think what those imaginary aliens would say about me!

It's not only how we spend our time that matters, but also our energy. How much of my mental, emotional, spiritual energy is wasted on fears and anxieties that stand in complete opposition to the Resurrection faith I proclaim? Friends, I worry **a lot**. I worry about my sermons and what people think of them; I worry about church attendance trends; I worry about my skin and whether or not I can fit into last year's jeans, and whether it's healthier to cut out gluten or dairy or sugar or all three; I worry about my child's safety, and if he's spending too much time playing video games, or drinking enough fluids to be well-hydrated during the school day; I worry about my neighbors who are friendly but drive too fast and told me they have enough guns in their house "to start a war;" I worry about Congress and the limitations of the two-party system and the rise of incivility and

the existential emptiness of our lives; I worry about being and doing *enough*... can anyone relate? Can I get an amen?

It's just too much, right? How do we get ourselves out of this mess?

"I have told you, and you do not believe."

I want to believe. I want to believe with every ounce of my being. Not just with my mind, not just with my heart, with all of me, all that I am and all that I ever will be.

"My sheep hear my voice. 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."

We have a Good Shepherd, a Savior who gave his all for us, who has promised never to leave us, never to abandon us. The forces of violence and evil cannot stand against his Gospel of abundant love and eternal life. This doesn't mean that evil disappears, that hatred ceases, that each one of us won't experience suffering and, eventually, death. But it does mean that we are held and known and loved, and that death is not the end of our story. We have been created for holy purposes, we reflect the image of our God, and we can do great things with and for our Savior.

There is a better way to live.

How do we do it? We start by listening for his voice. Jesus calls to us, he assures us that we know his voice and that nothing can snatch us away from his loving embrace. If we can't hear him yet, perhaps it's because we are the kind of sheep who fill their lives with so much busy-ness and stress and superficial nonsense that we're distracted from our Shepherd's call. If we clear away some of that noise, if we set down our compulsions and our anxieties, if we make space in our lives for Christ, and seek him above all else, then maybe we'll hear him coming through, loud and clear. We have to lay down the heavy armor of our pride and self-importance before we can enter into his presence.

There are people around us who are really good at this whole attentively-listening-sheep thing. Loyal followers of Jesus who live in the same messed-up world as you and me but organize their lives around discerning his call and then doing his will. They're good sheep. People like Tabitha (or Dorcas) from today's Acts reading. Tabitha wasn't particularly concerned with things like success or status or wealth or achievement; she was "devoted to good works and acts of charity."ⁱⁱⁱ Her life wasn't all about herself, she wasn't running on that more-more-more treadmill that so many of us are on... her life was about serving Christ, about listening for the call of her Good Shepherd and doing his will. Hers was a life of clarity and holy wisdom, confidence in her Shepherd's love, and dedication to the work he called her to do. Perhaps that's why Tabitha is the only woman in the entire New Testament who is identified as *mathetria*, a disciple.^{iv}

"I have told you, and you do not believe."

We keep coming back to Jesus, and begging him to make things clearer, to explain it to us again and again, just like those who questioned him during his earthly life... but he's already told us. He's already given us everything we need.

The amazing poet Mary Oliver, who died January 17th, was a lyrical prophet of better living, meaningful living, holy living. Her poems touch readers so deeply because they express the truth about our lives -- the truth that isn't captured in achievements or promotions or upgrades, the truth that goes so far beyond ourselves. In her final published collection, titled "Upstream," she finishes one poem with this statement: "Attention is the beginning of devotion."^v

Attention is the beginning of devotion. Sheep and shepherds know this; poets and mystics too. And we know it, in our bodies and our souls, don't we?

Be Christ's sheep. Listen for his voice. Follow him. Know that we rest in the palm of his hand. Answer his call. Let him be our Shepherd, not just on Sunday mornings, but all the time. Stop grasping for meaning and purpose apart from him.

This world doesn't need more cynics, or masters, or stars. This world needs more Tabithas; more sheep who will lay down their pride and their privilege, listen for their Shepherd's voice, and follow him. How about you?

ⁱ John 10:25 NRSV

ⁱⁱ *ibid.* verses 27-28

ⁱⁱⁱ Acts 9:36

^{iv} www.rachelheldevans.com/blog/mutuality-women-leaders

^v <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2019/05/mary-olivers-poetry-captures-our-relationship-technology/589039/>