

I have dreaded this week. First, because our scripture today is one that is often taken out of context, twisted to serve the speaker's interests all in the name of God. I have also dreaded this week because we're still in the pandemic. As of Monday, in Jefferson County, we had 29,669 partially vaccinated people or 11.67% of the population of 254,340 and 18,434 are fully vaccinated or 7.25% for a total of about 18% in our county. This time last year we were still in the early days of stay home orders, being asked only to go out for essentials. It felt then chaotic but looking back it was only chaotic emotionally – physically, we were all home. We had a virtual palm procession and we were all hoping that by Pentecost this would all be behind us. Instead we're facing a second Easter, second set of birthdays in this time called "quaran"tied. If only, wishing made it so.

I spent hours reading this short passage, praying, dreading, listening, reading because I wanted a different reality. Why, because each of us want to be done with our current reality. We want to be done with masks. We want to do be done with distancing. We want to be done with all of it. We want what we've always been able to do. And yet, God is not just present with us but is continually speaking in the still small voice, just as God always does. In our Gospel reading this day we hear Jesus make some clear distinctions about voices you may hear, but the true Shepherd is speaking words of abundant life for all. The other voices you may hear, those ones that did not come in through the gate – they are there stealing and hurting us.

It is easy to forget that Jesus was not the most popular teacher on the block. In fact, those in the big synagogues & the temple, didn't like what he was teaching at all. It was getting ugly and would only get worse before it

got better. But Jesus attracted the crowds— they were hungry for something that they were not getting anywhere else. I'm not just speaking of metaphorical hunger, actual hunger. The crowds that did gather – they were sick and were not getting care. I'm not simply speaking of metaphorical or spiritual sickness, actual sickness. The crowds that did gather – they were being taken advantage of, preyed upon, put in unsafe situations, not for their own benefit but for someone else's comfort. Jesus had compassion and fed the crowds, when even the disciples, were telling him to send them away. Jesus had compassion on the man born blind, the leper, Lazarus and healed them, even when the disciples, were asking who had sinned that caused the illness. Not even death kept Jesus from healing. Jesus had compassion for the victim of abuse, those who were being taken advantage of and literally put his body as the gate to make sure everyone who heard his voice could have life. And a life that was not just scraping by but abundant life. A life where all needs were met. A life where no one was hungry, sick, hurt, abandoned, isolated. Jesus was promising a life that we have never known. Jesus was not describing an exclusive or elite group but a safe place where everyone was safe, fed and cared for with the others in the fold. Abundant life is not a life of abundance.

In the early church 2 theologians called the church to different understandings of living faithfully. One spoke of the church as a hospital for sinners – meaning everyone is hurting and in the process of being healed. Another spoke of the church as a morally perfectible society – meaning everyone once they knew God could grow and live a virtuous life. One was judged as a faithful leader who understood the call of Jesus in our lives. The other was judged as a heretic. Which is the faithful way of life.

The church universal weighed in and called one heresy. And yet we still have people living both ways as if they were both faithful. If you thought it was the church as hospital that would be the faithful life.

When you go the hospital it is never first come, first served. The hospital is always examining, triaging who has the greatest need and serves them first. You always want to be in the situation where you are not being served immediately, because if you are, you know that it is not good. And yet, we always want to be first, we always want our way, right now. Jesus still loves us, even when we think our problems are the most pressing, when they are not. Jesus is still speaking wonderful words of life.

Many years I was taught to turn to wonder instead of judgment. At first glance it makes perfect sense. But do you know how hard it is to turn to wonder. When we are presented with a situation and our gut reaction is condemnation, it means we are experiencing discomfort. And when we are uncomfortable, we want to immediately make ourselves comfortable again, so what do we do? We belittle, judge, or otherwise find a way to make it go away, even if we unintentionally leave a path of destruction in our wake. But turning to wonder, causes us to question, ourselves and the situation. I wonder what would cause a person to slam the door or say that I am fearful? I wonder what I may be missing. Turning to wonder takes our emotions out of the moment and engages our minds instead.

We know Jesus' voice, even if we were not in the Mount of Olives those many years ago. We know Jesus' voice who in his first public act of ministry in the Gospel of Luke chapter 4, stands and reads from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 61 - "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he

has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.' I wonder how those who were poor, captive, blind, oppressed heard those words? As a balm in Gilead, indeed the good news of Jesus Christ. And we wonder how those who were rich, free and healthy heard those words? Why doesn't he care about me? But if we, who are rich, free and healthy wonder why Jesus speaks to them first, our hearts are softened and broken open to the good news for all.

I wonder what happens when we turn to wonder when we encounter a situation that is uncomfortable. I wonder what happens when we listen for God's still small voice in our midst, always lifting up those who are in hunger and need? I wonder if in this our second Holy Week in the midst of this pandemic, we can set aside our own wants and desires to make room for other's needs. I wonder if when we give up our wants and desires if other's needs, as well as our own are met. I wonder if we can see the church as a hospital, for we all are broken and in need healing. I wonder if the good news of Jesus Christ who is the shepherd, the gate, the resurrection and the life, will give us the abundant life with all of the people of God. I wonder what our community would be like, practicing wonder, tending to the needs around us. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.