

5-7-17 "Reclaiming Lost Awe" A Reflection on Acts 2:42-47, John 10:1-10 by Mark Arbisi, Christ Church, KBK

The Church designates these twenty-four hours on the calendar as "Good Shepherd Sunday." Doing so serves as our annual reminder of who and whose we are. We're of course not the Shepherd—there is only one of those and we who honor this day are blessed because we are among those who recognize that we're not the one calling the shots. We're the ones who follow the one who is. As John highlights, we're clear on this distinction because we have ears to hear. John phrases it "we know because we 'hear' his voice." Now that may at first strike you as unremarkable; you may be thinking, "Well of course we hear our Shepherd's voice, be it with ears, or heart, or spirit, we hear." But please, don't be so quick to diminish yourself. This is no small gift. Your ability to hear makes you exceptional.

More than ever before the world today abounds with false voices, false shepherds, false truth, or in today's popular vernacular, false news. Friends, I don't have to tell you because I'm sure you are well acquainted with the difficult place society now finds itself--nearly superhuman endurance is required of each one of us to sort and shift, to discern, to claim and reclaim, recognize what is the voice of our Shepherd God in and amidst the ever increasing cacophony of escalating noise assaulting us; and what is most certainly not our Shepherd's voice. And again, your ability to do that, "*to know his voice and not follow a stranger*" makes you exceptional people. Moreover, you're exceptional people because no "*strange voice*" no "*thief*" no "*bandit*" is sufficient to long distract you from the journey you're on toward what John describes as true "*life and abundant life.*" He speaks of us "*finding pasture*" which is that wondrous place that place by whatever name all humanity craves, the where the lion and the lamb—yes, sheep—lie down *together*. Together. Imagine.

"Together." In all the world is there another word that better describes who we are and what we're all about? Yes, flock, yes, Body of Christ, yes, the UCC speaks of "united and uniting" and "open and affirming" as unifying identity pieces, and the United Methodist also have "united" right there in our name. Of course just "Church" describes our corporate identity. Plural. Not one, many. Together, as one in universal fellowship, together behind a singular purpose, which however imperfectly this may be achieved is that which identifies us. All of which is true because of the one voice of the one Good Shepherd whom we hear above all other voices.

Nowhere in our New Testaments do we chance a clearer glimpse of such radical togetherness than we do in our oft quoted, most extraordinary lesson from Luke's Acts of the Apostles, where we're introduced to the concept of radical sharing: "*All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the*

proceeds to all, as any had need." And BTW, it must be noted that in the First Century this practice of having all things in common was the closest thing anybody had to universal healthcare. Most remarkably, the poor, the ill, the elderly, the outcasts, the forgotten had the most valuable of resources available to them--people, carrying, loving, committed people, a community which would give the shirt off their back, which would sell their possessions for the common welfare, who would distribute all resources and surplus fairly, equitably, in a way that insured the "*least of these*" were guaranteed a place at the head of the line—would be the very first served! Imagine. Yes, with us Christian sheep the last always come first. Yet, today it seems, not so much, not so much at all, not when our elected representatives vote to discontinue healthcare to the tens of millions of the most vulnerable.

Now as responsible, faithful sheep we do darn well to ask ourselves why is that. Why not so much today? Why does society, why do our churches look so very different from the first glimpse of the first communities formed by the very first Christians? I asked myself that question and I believe we have our answer right here. I believe Luke clues us in by identifying that key ingredient that is necessary to spark radical and abundant, vital and faith-filled communities. My deductive discovery and Luke's insightful word is "Awe". "*Awe came upon everyone...*" Now think about that a minute. When was the last time your spirit was filled with awe? The last time you were one among many who among all the things that were shared in common was awe? How many times recently have you experienced awe while listening to Jesus' teachings, awe, while at fellowship, awe, while braking bread together, awe, while in corporate prayer? Luke says this is what the very first friends of Jesus shared in common. Awe. He also insinuates it was awe that made everything tick. Yes, I'm thinking Churches today could tick along much better with more awe in our tank. "Give us some awe" would be an excellent prayer for all of us to share in common all the time.

One definition of awe is this: an "emotion that combines veneration with inspiration," or simply deep respect with deep wonder. Pretty nice if you can get it. Also, very motivational. My guess is we could waste the next twenty centuries debating why awe seems to be on hiatus as of late, just how that could have happened to nice sheep like us, exactly where the fault lies, etc., etc.; but I pray we don't. I pray we—the universal flock that is today's Church—can simply confess that we've fallen short and that there is much room for improvement; moreover that if the Church is going to survive well into the future there are many things among us that can be improved, places for awe to come rushing in. You know, all those "*wonders and signs*" that sustained all those early Christians, and all those "*glad and generous hearts*" that awe produced way back when? Yes, such gifts from our

Shepherd are ours to share in common, so too, ours to create. Ours to nurture.

Now we all know because we've all had firsthand experience with them, but there is always a naysayer or two, or three close by who, intentionally or otherwise, simply in saying "Nay" shuts down all kinds of really good, exciting, spirit-filled, *awesome* stuff from happening. Now these naysayers are sure to have any number of reasons to say "Nay", because, well they are practiced. And among them will come something like, "Well, Luke's version of community was merely an idealized vision, it doesn't bare any resemblance to historical reality." True or not, and I happen to believe Luke's description is more accurate than most would imagine possible, it doesn't matter. Not at all. Even if Luke's description of community is *only* an idealized vision, that *alone* is sufficient inspiration to fill us with awe, awe enough for a lifetime, awe enough to balance any budget, awe enough to feed, house, educate and bless with healthcare without a single preexisting condition everyone. Now how awesome would that be?

Friends, we have a choice. We humanity, we Americans, we Christians, we Christ-Church-groupies, we have a choice. A politician of the last century put it well, saying "We are the first generation with the power to both feed every hungry person in the world and destroy all life on the planet" (JFK). Ultimately the choice is as straightforward as which voice are we going to listen to. And there is no more urgent time to claim the Voice that is above all voices than today. Darn it, naysayers have had their day.

Today demands "yea-sayers." People who say "yes" to the type of communities our faith has always called us to form and to belong to. People who say "yes" to full and abundant life, no longer for the 1%, but for everyone. People who say "yes" to old but unexplored possibilities. People who say "yes" to Luke, "yes" to the radical sharing of resources, "yes" to all the goodwill taking place that we hear of in our lesson today." Today requires people who say "yes" to the crystal clear picture of God's love for all people, "yes" to, most importantly, "yes" to God's will for those of us who just happened to be lucky enough to "know his voice." "Yes" to our role in being the ones out there finally and forever shouting down the naysayers of the world. And if this resonates, if you're starting to sense some of that "awe" that comes with new and exciting real-world possibilities; if in other words you have once more heard our Shepherd's voice, then there is no need for another word from me this morning.

Amen and praise indeed be to our awesome God!