

Sermon for 25 April 2021 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Fourth Sunday after Easter

Scriptures: Acts 4:5-12; Psalter p. 137 (Response 1) Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

“Deep”

This is one of those Sundays when I'd just like to follow the scripture and “Be still and know that I am God.” Maybe be a Quaker and be quiet and wait for the “inner light.”

It helps to remember that our texts come from many people, in many circumstances, at different times and in different places.

It comes home more and more to me, as I age and as I live alone, and certainly in the separation this pandemic brings day by day and night by night, that nobody has just one mood. I'm not even sure of the same thing all the time.

I like to say the word of God is deep. Not just the book's words, but the meaning, and in person, in the ways truth comes through differently in the life of one person.

Today's word starts out with Peter defending himself before the authorities for the way he acted as a healer ... knowing that in those days folks had a more free-wheeling understanding of sickness and health, birth trauma and lifelong habits, as well as spirits and skills, than we tend to. It's always been part of our movement to think like this, and it's puzzling and thrilling at the same time.

Then we go back to the bedrock of the Hebrew faith with the image of shepherd for God, which never ceases to comfort and draw together believers over all sorts of rough terrain. Our funeral service never fails to get a rise of voices no matter how silent the gathering, coming out of memory and companionship from long gone days. Thank God we can still memorize even in these I-pad days. Spirituality is in common and in the heart, by heart, to a real degree.

The letters of John all have their own unique tone, saying so many things we know but need to hear in the midst of praying together. By this time, the movement we call “church” had its words and ways of expressing life-truths, as long-partnered people have special ways of saying serious things to each other. “You just have to do what you have to do” means special things to different couples; “I didn't know,” and “I still wonder” carry their own ring in quiet, familiar voices. People talk that way that you'd never expect, late at night, two or three together...

I do have to point out, always, the rough edges we Christians have in the matter of being sure of religious things. “For there is no other name,” Peter declares; and we are wise enough now to know the truth of conviction alongside the mystery of love in this varied and surprising world we are coming into year by year and revelation by revelation. I have no final word in the fact of the Spirit any more. Jesus and I grow together in new ways, among fresh insights, over and over. How it's all coming together is not my specialty. I'm in the surprise stage, more and

more. Be patient; be welcoming; be still, except to be clear on each other's freedom to grow and learn.

What all this says in a week that has brought justice as well as sadness is a lot like what's been happening all spring. Occasions to pray, to cry, to judge and to stand back, seem to pile up. Our young mayor came in for some hard words for his budget proposals. God help him to hear even as he dares and reaches for new ways to slow the killing and the bleeding all across our city.

Deep words. Deep issues. Great varieties of religious experience. We are asked to learn a new language even as we come into honesty of pain and guilt, sin and promise, our elders never lived to see. We have a workable faith. It deserves fresh application, on every corner, in all hearts.

Deep unto deep. Let us listen well, and speak the truth in love, through Jesus Christ. Amen.