

Malcolm Clemens Young
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA X15
4 Easter (Year A) 8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Eucharist
Sunday 7 May 2017 Good Shepherd Sunday

Acts 2:42-47
Ps 23
1 Peter 2:19-25
John 10:1-10

Older than the Cross

"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn. 10).

The Sarvāstivāda School is a form of Buddhist philosophy. It's name means literally the "Everything Exists at the Same Time" School. They believe that the past, present and future live in every moment.¹ This perfectly describes my experience last week going back to Cambridge, Massachusetts for an alumni reunion.

I always hesitate a little when someone asks me where I'm from. In short, I think that you are from the place where you learn to drive. For me that's the great central valley of California. But before then and after then I lived in Massachusetts.

When my great Aunt Fran's husband died from appendicitis at the age of twenty-nine, my grandmother Ruth and her sister Louise came down to Cambridge to help raise my Aunt Jessie Lou. For seventy years some combination of them lived in a brick apartment building close to Harvard Square.

When my father was a child, and when I was, we visited these aunts. We would bake peanut butter cookies as we played gin rummy. We would ride the subway for fun, go to the natural history museum and run across Cambridge Common. This week I walked by the places where my grandparents and parents met and were married.

I passed the cooperative gardens my uncle farmed, the computer labs where my dad worked in his twenties, the 75 bus stop where I would go to visit my grandparents after they retired and my grandfather had had a stroke.

The memories felt so tangible, as if they were somehow still happening right now – it was as if while walking in springtime as a middle-aged priest I was also just leaving the American Repertory Theater with my parents in a snowstorm. At the same time, I could smell spring mulch, the summer rains on the pavement and autumn leaves in the Yard. I felt an intense sadness on the sidewalk where I said goodbye to my grandparents for the last time when we moved west.

When I moved back to Cambridge in my twenties I added whole new layers of memory. Last week in my mind's eye so many of my old teachers and friends came so close to me. I would turn a corner and suddenly experience the rush of feelings I had when my Hawaiian wife Heidi made her first snowman, when I preached for the first time, the place I proposed to her, our first apartment above the P & K Deli. Somewhere in my heart are all the feelings I had learning to row a single shell, becoming a father, taking long walks with the baby backpack and graduation.

Everywhere I could feel the presence of these ghosts. They must be with me all of the time, just beyond my awareness. But for one week I let them lead me.

The church has memories like this of Jesus. Jesus is with us today and has always been with the church. In the beginning Christianity was illegal. Followers of Jesus' way met secretly in catacombs and private houses. Today archeologists know how the first Christians pictured their savior. The earliest drawings and symbols never include any kind of cross or suffering. They are pictures mostly of the Good Shepherd, images of loaves, fishes, grape vines and symbols of abundance. They imagined the church as the experience of being safely on board a boat with Jesus.

Those were times of terrible persecution and fear. The authorities could kill you for having found new life in Jesus. Today we still experience doubt, incompleteness and anxiety. Sometimes our life seems empty of meaning, a kind of broken dream. We feel unmoored, as if we have lost something that really matters. We feel distant from people who are supposed to love us.

You probably have an idea of what brought you here, but what if the real reason is that your shepherd has called you here by name? What if Jesus invited you here to fill you with what you need, to bring you home to your true self? In the place where our oldest memories abide, at the deepest level of our self, we recognize Jesus as our shepherd, as the one willing to die for us.²

Make no mistake when Jesus talks to his friends about being the good shepherd, he is angry. After healing a man born blind, the authorities cannot decide what to do about Jesus. Some of the leaders conclude that since the healing happened on a Sabbath he must be dangerous. They have threatened to excommunicate, or put out of the synagogue, the formerly blind man, his family and anyone else who suggests that Jesus might be the messiah.³

The ancient Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (25 BCE – 50 CE) was a contemporary of Jesus and also contrasted good and bad shepherds. He uses the two names of Moses' father-in-law to illustrate his point. The bad shepherd (Jethro) chooses human things over divine things and gives instructions to the wise. The good shepherd (Raguel) reveres authority, seeks the divine herd and brings forth justice and good judgment.⁴

Jesus talks about the "thief and the bandit" who climb the wall of the sheepfold rather than entering through the gate (Jn. 10). My friend the New Testament scholar Herman Waetjen believes that Jesus is referring to local religious leaders like Yochanon ben Zakkai. On the one hand ben Zakkai is like a thief (kleptēs) for ingratiating himself to the Roman leaders and in a sense stealing the authority they bestow on him. On the other, he is like a bandit or outlaw (lēstēs) by being willing to use violence against God's people to maintain order.⁵

Jesus says that in contrast the Good Shepherd calls the sheep by name. When they are confused Jesus tries another (paroimia) figure of speech. He says, "I am the gate of the sheep" (Jn. 10). I am like the one who lies down in the entryway in order to protect the sheep. We experience Jesus as the way we come into God's presence. The Greek word for sheepfold, aulē also means courtyard and connects Jesus again to the temple. John through his gospel leads his readers to regard the temple not just as a stone building in Jerusalem, but as the living human body of Jesus.⁶

In this chapter Jesus speaks for the first time about the Gentiles, the non-Jewish people as, "other sheep not from this fold." He says, "I will bring them also, and they will listen to my voice" (Jn. 10:16).

So here we stand. The false and the good shepherds take sheep to green pastures and streams for drinking. Both kinds of shepherds bring them back home to the sheepfold and in many respects may seem almost identical. But when the wolf comes the false shepherd flees and the good shepherd risks his life for the sheep he knows by name. What do false shepherds look like today?

I'm sure that many of the people around secular San Francisco might be tempted to believe that they don't have a shepherd, or perhaps that they are their own shepherd. I often here people say, "I don't believe in anything."⁷

But it is impossible to be human and to not believe. Some of us believe in saving and good accounting systems, others in having a good time. Almost all of us believe in money and power. I have friends who believe that their workout gym body will protect them from death. At times we believe most strongly in our own anger, in withholding forgiveness and nursing our grievances. We need a good shepherd.

During Easter we revisit the very earliest recollections of Jesus. We remember Mary Magdalene unhinged by grief at the tomb, Peter and John racing to tell their friends what they saw, Thomas' feelings of being left out of the most important moment in history and his friend's life, Paul's shocking encounter on the road to Damascus. We remember that Jesus did not just leave them to their own devices.

In the middle of their fear and doubt, their guilt for abandoning him, Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. I stand between you and the way of death and sorrow. I am watching for you, helping you to find your true path."

It is easy to feel demoralized this week with all the news we hear. In the midst of our breakups, fears for the future, the damage we do intentionally and unintentionally, the ethical compromises of daily life, the pain we bear – when we persistently choose death, Jesus blocks that way. Jesus says to us, "I love you no matter what you've done. You will be part of my family."

In Jesus we are never abandoned, or overlooked, or alone. Our life is precious in his eyes. And so this good shepherd constantly invites us into a new beginning, to become a new person in a new tomorrow. Isn't this what abundant life means? As God's children we can experience, happiness, peace and full participation in the Kingdom right now.

I began by talking about the uncanny contemporaneity of past, present and future, how people and places and feelings from different times are with us always. On Thursday members of my old churches surprised me at Evensong for my birthday. As I looked across at all my old friends I saw Alice. I instantly had a vivid memory of being with her as her husband declined with dementia. After his death she reassured *me*! She said I know that Jesus is with me and that I'll get through this.

Maybe the Sarvāstivāda School is onto something. Perhaps in the world of spirit everything does exist in the same time. This week in Cambridge and at Grace, Fran, Ruth, Louise, Elmore, Alice and George felt so near. Jesus is with us in the same way. With our life we can cultivate a spirit of invitation. We can walk away from the false shepherds and turn to the one who stands between us and death. We can say yes to the real reason we are here. We can have life and have it abundantly.

¹ Charles Hallisey, Lecture: "The Presence of Buddhism in Our Public Life," Harvard Divinity School Bicentennial, 28 April 2017. See also, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhist_philosophy.

² Paul Scott Wilson, "No Dead End in Christ," *Preaching John's Gospel: The World it Imagines*, ed. David Fler and Dave Bland (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2008) 157ff.

³ "His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue" (Jn. 9:23).

⁴ Herman C. Waetjen, *The Gospel of the Beloved Disciple: A Work in Two Editions* (NY: T&T Clark, 2005) 260.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 262.

⁷ Paul Scott Wilson, "No Dead End in Christ," *Preaching John's Gospel: The World it Imagines*, ed. David Fler and Dave Bland (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2008) 157ff.