

A God Who Calls Us by Name

A Sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on April 25, 2021

Friendship Presbyterian Church

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.”

So again, Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.”

(John 10:1-5, 7-16, NRSV)

I know it may sound funny to say, but some of the more amusing things you can run across when you do family history research are gravestone inscriptions. Every now and then, you find one that is just priceless. I found such a one just the other day doing a little online research on one of my Dad’s family lines.

It was the grave of a couple – some 19th century ancestors of mine, of Scottish heritage – in a rural Methodist Church cemetery in the panhandle of Florida ... The Mount Ida Methodist Church cemetery. The gravestone itself is typical of others there, but the message on it stands out. It’s simple, but memorable (and kind of hilarious – to me anyway).

Below the names and ages and dates of death is this little, stand-alone inscription on this stone in this rural Methodist Church cemetery: "They were members of the Presbyterian Church."

I just love this. Makes me proud to be one too! Whether this message was their idea (knowing they might – horrors of horrors! – be buried in a Methodist Church cemetery) or something that the Methodists themselves felt compelled to add is unknown. Either way, gravestone research *can* be fun at times.

But at other times, it can be a sobering reminder. There are few things quite so poignant as an old gravestone, in a neglected country cemetery, with an inscription so worn down by the elements that you can't read it anymore. What once was a testimony – in stone – to a human life once as alive and real as we are now, is now lost to us, and forgotten, erased for all time.

This is now the 4th Sunday of the Easter season. It's a season in which we explore the power and significance of the Resurrection for our lives today. What does it mean to "practice Resurrection" on this side of the Easter good news? What kind of people will we be in its light? What kind of church will we choose to be?

I think our experience of the worn-down gravestone can help us with these questions and give us insight into the Easter proclamation of Resurrection life. And it can do this precisely because it gives us an insight into *Death*, and the *power* of Death.

We can talk about Death as the conclusion of a particular life ... the proverbial "return to dust." Sometimes, it's tragic and apparently meaningless. Other times, it seems less ominous – more like relief or the fitting end to a story.

But the reality of Death is bigger than just bedsides and gravestones. Whether experienced as pointless or as fulfillment, Death, in concert with its partner Time, has an ominous power that is undeniable – a power that may be the most terrifying of all: The power to wipe away all memory of us ... to *erase* us ... ultimately, as on a worn-down stone, to take our very *names* from us.

As a verse from Isaac Watts' great hymn puts it – its poetry rooted in the 90th Psalm –

*Time, like an ever-rolling stream,
soon bears us all away.
We fly forgotten, as a dream
dies at the opening day.*

Building on this melancholy truth, the New Testament view of Death, too, is soberingly realistic. It understands Death as more than just the cessation of biological existence, but as *dissolution* ... as a *force* which reduces all that we know, all that we love, all that is good and beautiful, to nothing, beyond the reach of time and memory.

But the New Testament vision goes still deeper, for in it, Death is not merely a blind, indifferent force of Oblivion. It sees this force as having a malevolent will of its own, enlisting the living into its service. It sees it as an enemy, active in the midst of life – an enemy which is the very *negation* of life ... not content merely to kill, but to debase, de-humanize, and destroy.

International Holocaust Remembrance Day was just over two weeks ago. It's understandable and natural to see the Nazis as the most infamous example of Death's agents in this sense in

our modern history, but their death-dealing began long before the first crematorium was built. It began long before the first rail car was loaded with human freight to be taken to a camp.

It began with turning away from one's own neighbors near at hand. It began with believing lies. It began with conditioning a people to see another people as something less than human. It began with decent people denying the evidence of their own eyes.

And so, by the time the last barbed wire was put up and the camps opened, the malevolent power of Death had long been loose. And soon, men and women, boys and girls, were no longer called by their names, but had numbers tattooed onto their arms. Because that's what the power of Death is and what it does: it takes people's God-given dignity away ... it strips them of their names ... and turns them first into commodities, into *things*, and soon into *nothing*, nothing at all.

But it doesn't take grown-up evils so obvious to get Death going ... Feed the beast fair portions of expedience and rationalization, along with steady servings of indifference, and no ounce of human dignity is safe.

And none of *us* are safe from being pulled into its designs. Its forces are insidious, and suffuse our perception of the world around us. The families in which we are raised, the cultures in which we live, the values we imbibe from the air we breathe – all these are in play and shape what we see, and *who* we see, and whose names we care to know.

Death, in this full biblical sense, is all too real. It not only erases us and all memory of us, but its power would also erase our *own* memory of who *we* are and who *others* are, wearing down and defacing the image of God in ourselves and others, until nothing is left.

It all seems so inevitable. But here's the good news – the good news of Easter that we dare to believe and proclaim to anyone and everyone who has ever despaired – the good news that Death shall have no dominion ... and that Life and Love have the final word.

There's a story told of an elderly gentleman in his 80's who arrived at a medical office about 8:30 on a busy morning to have stitches removed from his thumb. He said he was in a hurry as he had another appointment at 9:00 am. A nurse took his vital signs and had him take a seat, knowing it would realistically be some time before anyone would be able to see him.

A doctor happened to pass by the waiting room and saw the man looking at his watch, and decided, since he was not busy with another patient, that he would evaluate the elderly man's wound. On examination, it was well healed, so the doctor talked to one of the nurses, got the needed supplies to remove the sutures and redress the wound.

While removing the stitches, the doctor asked him if he had another doctor's appointment this morning, as he seemed to be in such a hurry. The elderly man told him no, that he needed to go to the nursing home to eat breakfast with his wife.

The doctor asked about her health, and the man told him that she had been there for a while and that she was a victim of Alzheimer's disease. As they continued to chat, the doctor asked if she would be upset if he was a bit late.

He replied that she no longer knew who she was ... that she no longer knew who *he* was ... that she had not recognized him for five years now.

The doctor was surprised, and asked him, "And yet, you still go every morning, even though she doesn't remember who you are?" The man gently smiled as he patted the doctor's hand and said, "Yes, but *I* remember who SHE is."

My friends, if ever you have heard a modern parable for the gospel, this is it. The word of Easter comes to us and proclaims the God of all Creation who does not abandon us to Oblivion ... One who knows our names, and who calls us by name out of the darkness of forgetfulness – redeeming us to be workers of Life and not of Death.

As you may have noticed, so much of our music and liturgy today are connected to our first scripture reading – perhaps the most familiar and beloved passage of all, Psalm 23. Have you ever wondered *why* it is so beloved? I think the answer is connected to *when* you are most likely to hear it read. You're most likely to hear it read at a *funeral*, at a memorial service. And it's beloved because it speaks the good news of the Lord who is our shepherd, who makes us to lie down in green pastures, who leads us beside the still waters, who restores our souls ... and when we do sojourn in the valley of the shadow of Death, we shall fear no evil, for we are not alone, we are not forgotten. The eternal God remembers who we are and steadfastly remains with us.

Jesus surely cherished those timeless words as we do, for how else could he speak of the Good Shepherd who loves the sheep and lays down his life for them, who calls his own sheep *by name* and leads them out to pasture. Did you notice that? The sheep have *names*. And the Lord, the Good Shepherd, knows them and doesn't forget.

And the Lord is calling to himself a *people* who will look out on the world as through his eyes and not forget either ... A people who will see the abused and the neglected, those whom the powers of Death would strip of dignity and justice, and *speaking their names*.

A few years ago, my church's youth took a mission trip to the Thornwell Home for Children in Clinton, South Carolina ... about halfway between Greenville and Columbia. The Thornwell Home was founded as a Presbyterian ministry in 1875, and today is a Christian community, offering hope and wholeness to abused, abandoned and neglected children by giving them a new home and surrounding them with people who love and care.

In preparation, our youth ran a school-supply drive over the last few months, and the donations were extremely generous. When the drive was complete, we took them up there after church

service. The Thornwell staff was thrilled; they could hardly wait to replenish their shelves with these needed supplies.

We spent the night Sunday in a guest cottage, and then the next morning, we helped clean and move furniture for a benefit sale in a few weeks. We all worked hard. But as much fun as the furniture-moving was, the best part was interacting with the Thornwell kids themselves. It was a little slow at first, but then some of our girls broke the ice with a group of elementary and middle school-aged girls in a way one like me could never have conceived ... by giving them nail polish to paint their fingernails and toenails! It was like Christmas in July!

I think that was what did it: a simple act of solidarity that changed the rest of our time there. We were invited by the children to join them for a movie viewing in the clubhouse and then for pool time in the late afternoon.

It was that afternoon, sitting by the pool, that something happened to me. I sat in the shade as our group and many of Thornwell's 90 kids were having fun in the water. I looked out at those beautiful children, and I looked into their faces - knowing that so many of them had come from homes in which they had been reduced to nobodies – unloved, uncared-for inconveniences. Some had been beaten, others neglected and ignored. And yet, I saw the light that lived in their eyes ... the elation in their play. And almost as if my fingers were guided to just the right place, my eyes fell upon the words of Jesus:

I am the gate for the sheep. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

It is not as if the scars of the pain of the past simply go away, because of a few hours at a pool. But somehow I knew that there, in that moment, my own eyes were witnessing something that they would never forget. I knew that whatever had happened before, that something else was happening now. Something powerful was at work ... something good ... something *holy*.

And I knew that these children, told by an indifferent world that they didn't matter, were slowly living into their *true* identity, into God-given names that no Death-dealing power can erase – names like *chosen, precious, and beloved*.

To the Glory of God. Amen.