

Sermons at St Paul's

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

May 7, 2017

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Today may be the only Sunday morning you will ever hear one of our oldest evening hymns read aloud! It's called the *Phos Hilaron*, from its Greek opening words. You can find it in the Book of Common Prayer on page 112 or 139 if you want to look for it, where it is called "O Gracious Light." This ancient prayer was written in koine Greek, the language of the gospels. It is one of my favorites.

O Gracious Light *Phos hilaron*
O gracious light,
pure brightness of the everliving Father in heaven,
O Jesus Christ, holy and blessed!

Now as we come to the setting of the sun,
and our eyes behold the vesper light,
we sing your praises, O God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

You are worthy at all times to be praised by happy voices,
O Son of God, O Giver of Life,
and to be glorified through all the worlds.

OK you may be thinking – but why is she reading us an evening prayer? Well, it's about the line: "*You are worthy at all times to be praised by happy voices.*" It is about being happy and content, and what it takes for us to get there, so that we may praise Christ with the happy voices that he is worthy to hear.

In today's psalm, epistle and gospel readings, we hear a lot about sheep. Psalm 23 is practically a guide to making sheep happy. There are green pastures, still waters, a shepherd with a rod and a staff to protect them through dark valleys, and life is good. Beautiful! Baaaa!

I brought along a contented little lamb this morning to remind you what a happy sheep looks like. See?

Contentment is a hard state of mind for many of us to find in these politically and socially charged days. Do you remember the last time you were content? When is the last time you raised a happy voice to praise God?

A couple of Wednesdays ago, our Rector, Cliff, came into the chapel for noontime Eucharist, and said that he had walked the labyrinth that morning. When he reached the center, a sense of all the blessings in his life flooded over him, and he realized how much he was grateful for.

This is the time in the church's liturgical year to remember to practice contentment. We are about halfway between Jesus' Resurrection and his Ascension. It is an Easter season of celebration, as Lent was a season of repentance. If ever there was a time to practice contentment, this is it.

How do we do that? Well, we begin by remembering that contentment is not resignation. It is an active process that begins with gratitude for all God's blessings in our lives. Being content also does not mean that we give up fixing things that are wrong or working to improve our lives. It does mean that we trust God and God's love for us. Being content is what the last two commandments are about – not being jealous or envious of what others might have. It is a happy person who knows that – perhaps just for now – they are where they are meant to be, and that they are doing what they need to do. Like this little lamb, a happy person can rest content with the day's work, and trust God that tomorrow will bring its own joys and challenges.

In today's gospel reading, those sheep are happy to hear their shepherd's voice, as he calls them out of their safe evening's shelter. He calls them out by name, to take them to their day's work of being sheep. Being near-eastern sheep, they follow him as he leads them. They are not driven or herded; they follow him willingly to their pasture. They trust him.

So contentment with our lives and ourselves starts from a deep trust in God that our lives and times are in the hands of a shepherd who knows us by name. It makes space for good pastures as well as dark valleys, and never forgets that God is the source of all good things. It lets us rest and be happy. When we are truly content and trusting, it is not hard to praise God with happy voices.

My grandfather used to describe many things in his life as having an "ample sufficiency." Not only was there enough, but there was a gracious largeness to much in his life. Despite having lived through two world wars and the Great Depression, despite having known poverty and hardship, he had the gift of naming a happy abundance wherever he found it. He had the habit of happiness because he had seen when there was not enough, and never forgot to enjoy the times when there was an "ample sufficiency." There was abundance in his life because he could see it and name it.

Jesus tried to tell his disciples how to see the world with the clear and happy eyes of contentment. He told them that thieves and robbers break in, that strangers try to trick his sheep

into going with them. But his sheep know him. They know who it is when he calls, and they will not be fooled.

He will call his sheep into abundance. There will be green pastures and still waters. They will walk with him through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and they will not fear evil. When the cup runs over because it is so full, they will laugh for the sheer pleasure of it. They will praise their shepherd with happy sheep voices.

Perhaps this habit of happiness is what our reading from the Acts of the Apostles is about. It describes a time when there was such a high level of trust and strong sense of abundance, that: *“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... They ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God....”*

It did not last, of course. Jesus did not return as quickly as they had hoped, and the cares of the world overtook them again. But I dare say that that amazing time stayed in their hearts. They told their children and grandchildren about a time of grace and abundance, of trust and love in the name of Jesus. And then a person we call Luke, wrote down the story of that time of contentment and peace. So that we can hear it today, as Jesus-followers have heard it for 2,000 years.

Holy contentment. Abundance. Trust in God. An ample sufficiency of grace has brought you here, to St. Paul’s Church, today. Blessed be the Son of God and Giver of Life who is worthy to be praised at all times by happy voices!

Amen.