

Our Gospel passage takes us back in time, back to a celebration of Hannukah, prior to the crucifixion. There are a number of images I'd like to explore with you from this passage:

- Joan Rivers... "can we talk?" That's what the Jews are essentially asking Jesus, "can we talk?" and what they want to know is really what we all want to know... tell us plainly about God. And the truth is language and metaphors are inadequate to describe God. It is impossible to plainly describe God.
- Jesus' followers are referred to as sheep. Jesus then, is the Shepherd. Those who recognize Jesus as Shepherd, as Messiah, as the Son of God do two things: they hear AND follow the Shepherd's voice.
  - only faith – that is 'trust' - allows us to do both.
  - John wants us to understand that Jesus is unified to God's purposes, and as such he and God are of one mind.

Therefore we can trust Jesus as we trust God.

- Then there is the image of the Hands ... Think of all the metaphors we have using hands: *talk to the hand, hand it over, hang on, hang tight, we're in good hands*– My sisters and brothers, we are

eternally protected in Christ's hands, even his broken and tortured hands we are protected. Nothing, no power can snatch us out of those hands.

It's relatively easy to urge trust and faith and its quite another thing, and often a hard thing to live into it. We know it perhaps intellectually, although it is much harder to incorporate it emotionally. We know it up here, but perhaps we don't know it here.

As a parish community, I see signs of us knowing we are protected in Christ's hands and that we can hear and respond to his voice. When I was called here, part of my task was to help the parish mourn and to heal. We have had to mourn not just the death of our rector, we have had to mourn our hopes for the church of our memories. We seem to have done fairly well with this, yet grief has its own timetable and is seldom linear. Some days we are hopeful of what we can be and some days, it may seem like it isn't worth the struggle. Like the Jews, we long for clarity. And in hearing the shepherd's voice, and in responding to it, we understand in our heads that our best chances at having a future is to collaborate with St. George's. We are in the beginning stages of this journey.

You may recall that late last year, the Vestry voted to “yoke” with St. George’s, which means that in some ways our two parishes will work more closely together in a cooperative arrangement, mostly with the goal of reducing our individual financial burdens. After our mutual annual meetings, the two Vestries appointed some of its members to produce a draft covenant. They have been diligent in their work. At the same time, our Vestry took the necessary steps to begin a Strategic Ministry review as a prelude to extending my contract with you. On Wednesday of this last week, the Vestry met. One item under consideration was the draft covenant between St. George’s and our Church.

Generally speaking, the covenant makes clear that we remain two distinct parishes sharing clergy and working together on ministries that extend the body of Christ into the world. Great care was taken to ensure that the worship services remain the same and that to the greatest extent possible, the time spent by clergy in each parish is roughly equal.

At our Vestry meeting last week, I heard consensus that this is ultimately where we are headed. However, I also heard that we are far from unanimity on when this actually happens. The covenant itself is

silent as to when we begin sharing clergy. Our pinch point is how long after my contract expires will I remain among you.

As my part of the Strategic Ministry Review I looked at the last ten years of data for our parish. What I saw will be no news to you: we have shrinking membership and the number of people who pledge is rapidly declining. The bulk of our budget is devoted to staff salaries and building maintenance. We have almost no money devoted to programming or outreach. In our parochial report to the National Church, we reported that our expenses exceeded our income by almost \$70,000. So far this year, our expenses have exceeded our income by over \$8,000. We are able to meet our expenses because we have investments and a comfortable cash cushion. The only place left to cut in our budget is staff salaries and my lived experience among you is that we can get away with a half-time priest without the vast majority of us even noticing the difference.

In my review of Ascension's ability to pay a full time priest, I have concluded that if nothing changes, this ability exists for almost three years. I have checked my assumptions with people I trust at the Diocese and they concur with my assessment. I know that some on our Finance Committee and Vestry would disagree.

In talking with trusted mentors and after a great deal of prayer, I conclude that it is in Ascension's best interests, both financially and spiritually to begin sharing clergy sooner rather than later. I intend to spend the remaining months of my contract continuing to build upon the strengths of this parish and to facilitate the partnership already underway with St. George's. I will continue to not only love you with all my heart, I will continue sharing with you the love of God in Christ. I wish to continue to be a blessing to you – and I hope that I have been a blessing to you – however, I think I will become a stumbling block to you if I remain here much longer than August of this year. I anticipate that you will begin to see strangers among us. While I sincerely hope that these strangers are looking for a church home, I also hope that they are members of a search committee seeking their next rector. I want you to know that I am actively seeking my next call.

There are some here who believe that if I leave in August the parish is not likely to survive as a parish. I respectfully and humbly suggest that too much power is being ascribed to me. Further, if this happens to be your instinct, then I have failed you as your spiritual leader. At my ordination to the priesthood, Bishop Mariann preached on the Good Shepherd text. She reminded us that priests are NOT the

shepherd; we're not even the hired hands, priests are merely one of the sheep. We too, must hear and follow Jesus' voice. We, as Christians cannot place our full reliance and trust in any individual except Jesus. Our psalmist places his trust in God, even in the darkest times. Psalm 23 ends that God's goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our life. A better translation would be that God's goodness and mercy shall *pursue* us all the days of our life. Goodness and mercy is pursuing us here at Ascension. I see it in the energy we are regaining and this energy is not coming from me – it is coming from you! We are each in Jesus' capable hands and not one of us will be lost.

Our Gospel passage relies on us being able to hear and recognize our Lord's voice. If we put ourselves in the place of sheep, caught in a thicket, or lost in the dark, going in search of the Lord's voice to its source can be downright scary, even painful as we work to free ourselves from the thorns. We are not promised a life free of pain or painful choices. We are promised God's love and mercy for eternity. And we are given hope. This parish and our Vestry are in a position to choose an action before we are compelled to take an action where we have no choice. To be proactive in strength is far better than to be reactive in weakness.

So please pray that we are all receptive to having God enable us to hear the Good Shepherd's voice AND respond to it. Pray for courage, for strength and continued momentum. Pray for quiet confidence that we are protected in Christ's hands and that not one of us will be lost. Please especially keep our Vestry in your prayers. Not one of us seeks to be "the bad guy." Not one of us wants to be perceived as betraying trust. None of us are operating from a place of malice. All of us seek to be faithful stewards of the bounty that we have been given. Pray that as we consider the draft covenant we may be lead to wise decisions on the parish's behalf and that we are given strength and courage to carry these decisions out. I ask all this in Jesus name.

AMEN.