

Acts 4:5-12. Context. This week's reading gives the next scene in the story of the healing of the lame man by Peter and John: as the crowd marveled at what they had done and Peter proclaimed to them the Good News and invited them to repent (thousands converted, according to the account), the authorities got wind of it. Towards nightfall, a guard was sent to arrest Peter and John, whom they detained. Again we hear Peter's Spirit-filled testimony to the resurrection of Jesus, this time to the very ones who had put him to death.

The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.' There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

Reflection. Robert W. Wall writes of this passage in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (10.92-93): "One of the cultural affectations that has always influenced the religious politics of the church is the value placed upon the educated person and informed opinion. Typically those who aspire to positions of spiritual authority in the life of the church must spend years being properly trained. No one should deny the importance of education in the production of a thoughtful, competent Christian leadership. Yet this story in Acts reminds us that spiritual authority is primarily the result of the Spirit's work in human life and is therefore subject to spiritual disciplines that make us more available to the Spirit's filling. Peter was an ordinary man who did extraordinary things to influence thousands of people because he was 'filled with the Holy Spirit.' While talent and a fine education are worthy attributes of a Christian leader, there is simply no substitute for the spiritually mature believer whose leadership reflects the rule of the Spirit in her life."

Psalm 23. Context. This psalm is perhaps the best known in the Bible, especially as it expresses the assurance of God's love and presence in the face of death. It also expresses the idea that God will provide everything we need for life: food ("green pastures"), water ("still waters"), safety ("right paths"). God is the one who keeps us alive ("restores my soul").

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff-- they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

Reflection. This psalm suggests that God is watching over us constantly throughout our lives, and that we belong to God as sheep to a shepherd. God is not only the shepherd, but also the host who invites us to fellowship in the "house of the Lord," the community of the faithful. That community is the true sanctuary, where we can be "safe and secure from all alarms," as the old hymn says. Do you feel that way at church?

1 John 3:16-24. Context. The First letter of John is one of three brief, anonymous letters – the author identifies himself simply as "the elder" in 2 John 1. Because of similarities in vocabulary and theology, they have traditionally been attributed to John, the author of the fourth Gospel. This week's reading again highlights an important theme shared with the Gospel: Jesus' fundamental commandment to love one

another as Christ has loved us. What immediately precedes this week's reading is a discussion of Cain, who hated his brother and murdered him. The contrast could not be more stark for those who follow Jesus.

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us--and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him. And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

Reflection. These verses contain the totality of Christian living: believe in the name of Jesus and love one another. The two must go together; neither on its own is an adequate expression of the Christian life. It's because we believe that God already loves us that we can love. And to love one another is to love "in truth and action," to walk the walk, not just talk the talk. We say we love those who are in need, but how much are we really willing to do about it? We regularly take special collections for the disadvantaged (our regular offerings we essentially spend on ourselves). Yet our special offerings may seem like a burden to some. But let's be honest: how much of your annual income (gross or net, it doesn't matter) do you actually give to those in need? 2%? 1%? Less than that?

John 10:11-18. Context. A common pattern in John's gospel is an account of a "sign"/miracle, followed by Jesus' dialogue with those who witness the sign, followed by an extended discourse by Jesus, drawing out the meaning of it all. This week's reading comes near the end of a section of John's Gospel that began with the episode of Jesus healing the man born blind. That event caused quite a controversy between Jesus and the Pharisees, even dragging the man and his parents into the fray. At the end of the day, the healed man, cast out of the synagogue by the Pharisees, worshiped Jesus; and Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for their own "blindness." Jesus continued with a discourse in which he uses a pastoral metaphor, first describing himself as the gate of the sheepfold: the sheep must enter through him to receive abundant life; others who set themselves up as "the way" are thieves who kill and destroy. He concludes the discourse with this week's reading, Jesus as the Good Shepherd. The prophets of the Hebrew Bible had described God as the "Good Shepherd," and denounced the members of the religious establishment as "bad shepherds" – here Jesus refers to them as "hired hands." The concluding verses clearly point to the climax of the gospel.

"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. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

Reflection. Jesus didn't have much good to say about the religious establishment. What does it say about our understanding of our relationship with Jesus that we've taken to calling our religious professionals "pastors" (literally, shepherds)? Are clergy the stand-ins for Jesus? God forbid!