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The Fourth Sunday after Easter

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New to Carmel Valley, I noticed last year as I drove along Carmel Valley Road coming toward Rancho San Carlos Road, a green sign with a white arrow that said: Refuge. The word refuge made me think of the word refugee, and that it might be a place of shelter or protection from danger or distress. Each time I drove past it, my curiosity was sparked as I wondered just what this Refuge was that the sign was pointing to.

Late in the spring in the midst of a particularly difficult day, a generous friend sensed that I could use a break and some self-care and gifted me a visit to Refuge. I had no idea what to expect. What I found was a beautiful outdoor space of lush plant life, comfy chairs, hot tubs, a firepit, and a no-cell phone policy. It was absolutely perfect. There, all by myself in the silence and the beauty of this contemporary Refuge, I found renewal of not only my body and mind, but particularly of my Spirit. There I felt sheltered away from the world, protected for a while from the demands of my life. I hadn't realized how much I needed this, nor how deeply I had longed to reconnect with God.

We hear in scripture of how Jesus intentionally takes time apart from his ministry and his disciples for rest and renewal, how he takes refuge in God. And in today's psalm, we hear one of the most familiar and most vivid descriptions of refuge found in scripture. First, the psalmist begins by naming the Lord: The Lord is my Shepherd, he writes, and then goes on not only to describe what finding refuge in God is like, but also to describe the many shepherd-like attributes of the Lord: one who leads with rod and staff; who accompanies and guides, one who cares for his own. Our gospels also paint many portraits of Jesus, the Christ. For example, we have Jesus the teacher, the healer and the preacher, as well as Jesus the light of the world, Jesus the vine, and the image of Jesus the Good Shepherd, the one who teaches us what it is to be in relationship.

But before we step into today's gospel, I'd like to step us back to chapter 9 and 10 of John, to get some context.

In Ch. 9, Jesus has just healed a man who was blind from birth, restoring his sight with saliva and mud. Word of this travels fast, and soon the Pharisees are interrogating the man, seeking for evidence that Jesus not only healed him, but did so on the Sabbath. Ultimately casting him out of the synagogue. Jesus then finds the man, reveals himself as the Son of Man, and the man believes.

Fast forward, and in an attempt to help folks who have witnessed this miracle better understand just who he is and why he came, Jesus speaks to them using the images of the sheepgate and sheep, identifying himself metaphorically as both the gate and the good shepherd: The one who calls the sheep by name, who came to give abundant life. The crowds and religious leaders can't decide what to just what to think about Jesus. Is he crazy, possessed by a demon, or might he be something more? Might he be who he has said he is? Might he be the Messiah?

Back to our gospel, we now find Jesus in the temple in Jerusalem, on the festival of the Dedication, or Hannukah. Frustrated and perhaps unsure of exactly what all Jesus' references to sheep and shepherds mean, they gather around him with urgency and demand an answer. "If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly", to which Jesus answers, "I have told you, and you do not believe." And then he adds, "You have seen what I've done, and you don't believe because you do not belong to my sheep. With a sentence, Jesus delineates between those who believe and those who do not.

Now, Jesus doesn't answer their question plainly or with a direct "Yes, I am the Messiah", or "No, I am not". Instead, he points to what matters most, that for which he has come: He points to relationship with humanity that arises out of belief in God. Like the relationship between a shepherd and its sheep, Jesus describes the care and protection, the intimacy and trust that are

fostered between him and those who believe him, those who hear his voice and who follow. He has made himself known in word and by action. He knows who believes and to them, he promises abundant life and the assurance that unlike a wolf which snatches away unprotected sheep, they will be with him forever. For those who hear and see and believe, protection and refuge are given.

Plainly said: to belong to Jesus is simply, to believe. And yet, we know that it is not that simple. While Jesus proclaims his good news to all, not all choose to believe. Belief is a choice. Ours to make. And it comes with both benefit and cost.

John also tells us that when today's conversation with Jesus came to an end, the response of those present was to gather up stones so they might stone him to death. Which, Jesus asked, of my works do you take issue with? They responded, It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God. This, it seems, is what they could not abide; could not dare to believe. For to believe this would disrupt their world as they knew it, it would call all they had believed before into question. To them, Jesus extends this invitation: "If I am not doing the works of my father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works; so that you may know and understand that the father is in me, and I am in the father." And still, they did not believe.

Belief in Jesus demands much of us. It demands that we give up what we think we know about God and others, so that we can try on God's way. It demands that we surrender to God, letting go of our needs for power, control and status as we lean in and allow Christ to lead and guide us. It asks that we give up self-reliance, instead relying upon God. Belief in Jesus means that we are called to seek and to listen to His voice, the voice that counters all the alternate voices that would have us doubting ourselves and God, those voices that try to tell us that we know more than God.

Like a shepherd beckoning to his sheep, Jesus calls us to himself, inviting us always to take refuge in the one who restores, renews, blesses and graces our lives with a fullness of life beyond our imagining, today. Right here. Right now. And forever.

We all need a place of refuge. A place we can come to when the heaviness of the world weighs upon us, when we are tired, or afraid, when we are weary or doubting; when to believe seems too hard. Refuge for some might look like the Refuge at the Carmel Valley Athletic Club. For others, it is found in nature, or time away with those who love us, or in times of quiet prayer. We all need to take refuge from time to time. For what is at the center of refuge, is God. Refuge is one of the places where God meets us. The Lord, our Shepherd, awaits those who believe with open arms, so that we might find rest and renewal, protection and assurance. While Jesus calls us to it, it is the Psalmist who reminds us of what refuge in the Lord can look like:

Rest: found in pastures of green and calm waters;
Renewal of our spirit, restoration of our soul;
Pathways forward, filled with goodness and God's abundant love;
Companionship at all times, especially in times of danger and distress;
Protection, Guidance, Strength and Comfort;
Nourishment that sustains us in the face of our fears and doubts;
Anointed and blessed, pursued by the God whose mercy and goodness endures;
The promise of fullness of life, in this moment; tomorrow; and forever;

Jesus said, Come to me, you who are weary, and I will give you rest. Our belief in Christ is made known in relationship, like that of a shepherd with its sheep. May we always seek and find refuge in our Lord, our Good Shepherd.