

Ps 23; Ac 2:42-47; 1 Pe 2:19-25; Jn 10:1-10

4th Sunday in Easter

Service of Holy Communion

We will celebrate the “birthday of the church,” or Pentecost, later this month. But today we consider the divine purpose and the preparation of Jesus-followers that was already happening long before that day – and long after. While the apostles were gathering quietly and secretly in their upper room and the church was being born, the Roman Empire was convulsed with intrigue and power struggles from Rome to the farthest outpost.

The story of the Emperor Tiberius, then in power, is a tragedy. Historians differ on his personal character, but Tiberius’ public reputation was ruined by bad press, political shenanigans, and by his own withdrawal from Rome. He retreated to the Island of Capri. He built a resort villa and left the governing of the empire to unscrupulous politicians. The fantastic rumors, the many assassinations and executions, the confusion of those who governed Judea – all caused anxiety among the people – from the least to the greatest. And this turmoil continued from the writing of the first letter to the churches right through the Gospels, to the last entry – the Book of Revelation, also called the Apocalypse.

So, let us check in on the writer of this letter to the churches – Peter. He draws a huge contrast between the character and the sacrifice of Jesus for our sake – and the character of the leaders of the day. He contrasts the ways of Jesus with the ways of His abusers (v 22). Peter reminds his readers that abusers use insulting language and threats of revenge (v 23) – but Jesus never insulted anyone and never threatened revenge. Peter calls his first readers – ***and he calls us*** – to answer to a higher power than the powers controlling life in the world. Jesus did not entrust Himself to the corrupt rulers of Rome, but to “the One who judges justly” (v 23). He entrusted Himself entirely to God. The outcome is this: Jesus carried ***in his own body*** on the cross the sins we have committed. He made a way – He ***is the way*** for us to live having nothing to do with sin – impossible without the Savior.

Peter calls believers in the day – and believers now – to return to the Shepherd and guardian of our lives – that is the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ.

This is encouragement to keep following the Good Shepherd – from the first days hiding out in the upper room – right through forming more and more Christ-centered groups (churches and congregations) throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. The church is founded on the open gate – the Way to God revealed in Jesus.

The passage from Luke’s narrative, Acts 2:42-47, is the handbook for establishing a small group of people seeking to follow Jesus Christ. When a group gathers, here’s what we share together:

- 1) The apostles’ teaching
- 2) Fellowship
- 3) Breaking of bread
- 4) Prayers

First, the apostles’ teaching was not yet written down in the early days of the church. As time passed, the apostles saw the need for writing down their stories about Jesus. They had told many people, but they wanted their witness to live on. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are the result. The telling of the Gospel was added to the letters written to the scattered groups of Jesus-followers all over the empire. Most of these letters were written by the Apostle Paul. The collection of all these writings makes up the New Testament. It is the apostles’ teaching. We also include the Old Testament.

Second, fellowship began in Jerusalem in the temple court, at Solomon’s Porch, and in the homes of Jesus-followers where a meal was served, and the needs of the poor were met – food, clothing and hearing the Gospel. There, in the fellowship, apostles and their followers spoke with the newcomers and welcomed them into the group.

Third, when Luke mentions the breaking of bread, he means the simple meal taken during worship – bread and wine – that represents for Jesus-followers the body and blood of our Savior. This special sharing is a remembrance of what Jesus accomplished by His death, resurrection and ascension back to His heavenly home. Worship consisted of sharing the Gospel – singing psalms and songs – prayer – and breaking bread together. Baptisms were done in worship also.

Fourth, prayers are part of the Sabbath gathering as well as the practice of Jesus-followers whenever we are together anywhere, any time. Prayer is also an individual practice or discipline. Prayer is the dialogue between the Good Shepherd and His sheep. You know the Good Shepherd is Jesus – His followers are His sheep. The gathering of the flock is the body of Christ.

It was Jesus who saw the church as a gathering of His faithful followers – as a flock.

“First Jesus told this story of the Shepherd and the sheep. They didn’t understand. So, He said, ‘I’ll be explicit...I am the Gate for the sheep. All those others are up to no good—sheep stealers, every one of them. But the sheep didn’t listen to them. I am the Gate. Anyone who goes through me will be cared for—will freely go in and out and find pasture. A thief is only there to steal and kill and destroy. I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of.’” (Jn 10:6-10 MSG)

In these two thousand years since Jesus walked the earth as a man, His flock has been scattered and regathered countless times. Persecution, political unrest, disease, terror – all these continue. Even today, persecuted Jesus-followers are being chased away from their homes to wander. When they find a place to stop and rest, what do they do? What should they do? What do we do – what should we do?

Devote ourselves to:

- 1) The apostles’ teaching
- 2) Fellowship
- 3) Breaking of bread
- 4) Prayers

Maybe you have said, “Things will never change much. We will continue in one place doing the same things until the final trumpet sounds.” We don’t expect to be uprooted, scattered, disrupted. When the unexpected comes our way, Jesus says, “Follow Me, I will care for you.”

Jesus comforted his disciples, “I have been given all authority in heaven and earth. Therefore go and make disciples in all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and then teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you; and be sure of this—that I am with you always, even to the end of the world (Mt 28:18-20).” Keep traveling the Emmaus Road. Amen.