

Luke 4:42-44
“The One Sheep That Matters Most Right Now”

June 7, 2020
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I have a confession to make to you this morning: I don't know where we're going, but I know we can't stay here. When I say, I don't know where we're going, I'm speaking metaphorically of course, because it would be silly to think that I don't know where this sermon is going...

No, I'm speaking of course about the people filling up our city streets with peaceful protesting. They know where they are and what they've come to do—speak out on behalf of the life of George Floyd. They are like the shepherd in Luke's gospel who leaves his 99 sheep behind to go off in search of the one who is in danger, of the one who has been lost. It's not that the 99 other sheep don't have lives that matter, it's that right now one life in particular—black lives—are being lost. So the shepherd takes to the streets and holds up his sign so the sheep who needs to see it can see it. This way they'll know they're not alone out there. The shepherd knows where he is and what he's come to do—to protest against that one sheep being lost forever.

Read the story in Luke's gospel and the shepherd, upon finding the one sheep, picks it up, lays it on his shoulders, and carries it back home. Not only does the shepherd know where he is and what he's come to do, but he knows where he's going—back home again. I'm not sure we can say the same about our peaceful protests, or about our country, that we know for sure what direction things are going in right now. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” What he also knew, however, is that there are many hands working that arc, and not everyone is going to want to see it bend in the same direction.

And so it should not surprise us that in the midst of peaceful protestation there is also looting, grandstanding, and pushback. For whether it is intended or not, all of this has had the effect of calling into question what direction exactly the moral arc needs to bend to find justice. “Isn't it also wrong that people are looting, destroying store fronts and private property?” I got asked

this week in response to the piece I wrote for our weekly online newsletter. It wasn't the question itself that struck me so much as it was the way the question was worded. "Isn't it *also* wrong?" "Also" is a comparative term. If the question had been, "Isn't it wrong that people are looting and destroying," then I would have answered yes. Looting is not a helpful response to anything. In fact, I find it to be a distraction from the peaceful protests and the more important questions at hand. But that wasn't the question. The question was, "Isn't it *also* wrong that people are looting and destroying?" I couldn't help but note that the person didn't name the "also." Were they saying, isn't it wrong that people are looting as it is that people are also protesting? Were they saying, isn't it wrong that people are looting as it also that George Floyd was murdered by police brutality? Were they saying, isn't it wrong that people are looting as it is also that black people must still demand their lives in this country? I don't know, but I think this person was challenging the direction in which so many are trying to bend the moral arc right now. Sure, it's wrong that George Floyd was murdered, but isn't it also wrong that people are smashing store windows and running off with free pairs of sneakers? Where's the bend in the arc towards justice for that?

I am trying so hard to remember today that not just anyone can ask a question and include the word "also" in it. George Floyd couldn't. Ahmaud Arbery couldn't. Breonna Taylor couldn't. Because only a person who assumes they have the power of the law on their side, and who expects to get fair and equal treatment under the law, can point to what someone else is doing and say, "But what about them over there? Aren't they also wrong?" and no black person in our country today can safely say that. Only I, a white person of privilege, would think to say "also." Only someone like me would be concerned for why people are destroying economic property and taking what is not theirs. Sadly, tragically, truly...black people in our country have never been given what is theirs to begin with.

So where do we go from here? Because I don't know where we're going. I know only that we can't stay here.

I want to offer us two images this morning as a possible way forward. The first is Jesus in our gospel reading for today from Luke chapter 4. He is early on his ministry still. It was only a few weeks ago that he was baptized by John in the Jordan River. It was a transformational moment for him and for everyone else in attendance. He was 29, 30, maybe 31 years old at the time. He wasn't like so many of the babies we see coming for baptism in church, where there is so much we don't know about them. Who are they going to become, what are they going to do with their lives? And mom and dad say, let's get them baptized now, and maybe it will have a positive effect. As they grow, they'll stay on the straight and narrow. But Jesus is already a grown adult when he comes for baptism. He's already pretty well hard-wired and everyone thinks they already got him figured out. Read the story. When John sees him he says, "What are you doing here? You don't need this." John thinks he already knows everything there is to know about Jesus. But maybe Jesus feels he's doesn't know everything there is to know about Jesus yet. That he's got something to learn still, something about himself that he's hoping to change, and he's hoping that getting baptized will push him along. And sure enough, it does. He comes up out of the water and a dove comes and rest on his shoulder—the Holy Spirit. And a voice speaks from up above: "You are my Son, the Beloved."

Now what's he going to do? He went down into the water as Jesus the 30-year old Jewish carpenter, he comes up as the Beloved Son of God. He goes home to Nazareth, goes into the temple, opens a scroll and begins to preach. *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free."* It's a revolution on every level. Those on the bottom are now going to be on the top. Those who had to go without will not anymore. Those who were enslaved will now be free.

And all his friends and family say, "Who does this guy think he is, coming around here telling us how it's going to be?" And they drag him by the collar to the edge of town and throw him.

It's no wonder then that Luke tells us in verse 42 of our text: "The next day he left for the open country." Other translations say, "He went into a deserted place." Sometimes, even as adults, we outgrow our homes and family, and we discover that if we're going to be faithful to the call of God upon our lives, if we're going to love our neighbor as ourselves, then we're going to have to go to the open country, out to where there's more room.

Some of you know what this is like. In the past week alone, you've left your homes and communities to go and be part of other communities, to walk the streets of someone else's neighborhood. You've made posters and buttons, you've asked hard questions about your own white privilege. Like the shepherd, you've wandered into the open country in search of that one sheep, because you want that one sheep to know that they matter just as much as the other 99. You've opened yourself to hard conversation with friends and family, and it hasn't been easy. It's caused division and disagreement, but it has also marked the way to peace and healing.

In the midst of all the images we are seeing on our computer screens and TVs these days, there is one image I want to leave us with this morning. After being turned out by his own family and thrown out of town, Luke says that "Meanwhile Jesus continued preaching in Galilee." Meanwhile. It's probably my favorite word in all of scripture. It's a word that means to show us that there's more to the story. That while this is going on over there, meanwhile this is going on over here. Meanwhile is the Bible's answer to its own also. In this case, while Jesus is having a hard time fitting back in with his old world, with his pre-baptized world that doesn't want to make room for the poor and the oppressed, he's meanwhile still preaching in Galilee. What is Galilee? Galilee is his friends and family that tossed him out. Galilee is where the 99 live, and where the shepherd is bringing the 1 to be welcomed back home again. Galilee is every world that we might want to give up on and leave behind. Galilee is where Jesus is this morning still preaching love, still believing that if keep at it, we will make of this old world a new one.