

EASTER FOUR, YEAR B, APRIL 21, 2024

How often are you identified with a number? At the bank you have account numbers, PIN numbers to access your accounts, and credit card numbers. We have social security numbers and medical insurance numbers. Utility companies give us a customer number. If you are pulled over by a police officer for speeding, he/she is interested your license, registration and insurance numbers and ... the number on the radar gun indicating how fast you were traveling.

Society has reduced us to numbers and nothing can be more impersonal than that. So, isn't it nice when someone remembers or calls your name instead of being known by a customer account number?

Do you remember the TV show Cheers and their theme song? It said, Sometimes you want to go where everyone knows your name and they're always glad you came. You wanna be where you can see our troubles are all the same You wanna be where everybody knows your name.

Think about that for a moment. What does it feel like when someone calls you by your name? We probably all remember how it felt to have your parent call your name. In my house if your entire name was called you knew you were in deep trouble. Names not only identify us but can be powerful and they are always very personal.

There is an expression that says "A good name is better than riches!" It is no wonder that parents take great pains in naming their children. Some of us have unusual names that make us stand out or more unique ones. Some of us were named after a family member or a close friend, some of us treasure our names, some of us change our names and some of us wonder where our names even came from. It all points to how important names are to us. It always adds something extra when you know not only why you've been given the name you have but are called by that name. It is very personal and intimate.

Today's scripture readings – the 23rd Psalm and the Gospel reading about the Good Shepherd in many respects is about names and naming. Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd – it is a name that we use to identify Jesus

What does Jesus mean and is trying to teach us when he calls himself the Good Shepherd? In the 1st century for a shepherd to truly care for his sheep he lived and ate and slept with the sheep and almost became one like them. He did this so that he could tell his sheep apart and know their uniqueness. He knew them individually and named them.

The job required leading the flock to pasture, seeking strays before they fell victim to predators, and accounting for the well-being of the whole flock to the owner at the appointed time. The law was such that if a shepherd lost any of the sheep to wolves, thieves, or carelessness, the shepherd was personally responsible for replacing that which was lost. If a wild animal attacked and killed a sheep, the shepherd could retrieve and show the carcass as evidence of the fight; and in that case, the shepherd would not be held responsible. This all meant that shepherds, in addition to everything else, were also expected to risk their lives for the safety of their flock.

It was no wonder that the really good shepherds were in short supply in Palestine. It was not an easy job or a glamorous one, nor was it a job that many sought after. Childhood images we have of the Good Shepherd are sanitized, romanticized,

and turned into a Hallmark greeting card. It was actually a very difficult, dirty job to tend sheep. As I said, shepherds were even expected to become martyrs for the sake of their animals.

That's why the image of the shepherd was such a powerful one for the people of Jesus' day. The shepherd would do anything to protect the sheep. Instead of the romanticized picture of Jesus as the Good Shepherd with a lamb around his shoulders, the image that his followers found comforting is that of a shepherd who is in the midst of the nitty gritty of caring for the sheep. He is in the dirt, sleeping on the ground, feeding them, walking out in front of them and guiding them over dangerous places to good pastures while constantly being alert for other animals that might threaten the flock and protecting his sheep by putting his life on the line. That's why Jesus says he lays his life down for us.

The term "laying down one's life" comes from the fact that the sheep would be kept in an enclosed space at night with only an opening for the sheep to go in and out. There was no gate, so the shepherd had to lay down across the opening so that the sheep would not wander out and wolves would not get in.

All this builds up a mental image of someone with an intense love for our total well-being at every turn of our life. Jesus knows us as individuals and calls us by name, which is the ultimate sign of love and respect. And in our ever increasingly electronic age, that's significant. Big business thinks of us as a number. Jesus knows us by name.

No doubt there are times when it seems that Jesus is a million miles away. We have prayed for help in times of sickness and we don't feel we've gotten any better. We have asked him to guide us through some difficult decisions but we have blundered on making one mistake after another and wonder where he is. We may feel as if we are losing our faith because we don't feel his presence but here is where one word in Psalm 23 makes a difference. It's in the phrase that says "yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death". Did you notice the Psalmist doesn't say though I sit, or stand, or mired in the valley. The psalmist says walk. When we focus on the word "walk" in Psalm 23, we realize that any time we find ourselves in the shadow of the valley of death or the shadow of a huge obstacle or the shadow of change and transition, the best and only thing we can do is to keep walking. Just keep walking towards the presence and voice of Jesus calling us.

If you want to obsess over why something has happened to you or you want to rail at God about your pain or misfortunes. Fine. But just keep walking. Why? Because we know if we stay huddled or hunkered down in our misery we will not get over or out of it. But if we move, if we slowly put one foot ahead of each other each day things will improve. Because with movement comes hope and the reality that Jesus hasn't gone anywhere. He is right there with us calling us by name and urging us to keep going. Sometimes it comes from others who help us and sometimes it comes in the form of our prayers of why. Just know that even in the places of our greatest loss, his love and presence still surrounds us and grounds us.

That's why we need to just keep walking. Walking from pain into purpose. Walking from frustration into faith. Walking from longing and lament into love. For Jesus is the good shepherd who says, "I know my own and my own know me." That is what we hear in the psalm. That is the heart of Easter faith—that we are never alone, and that a voice is calling you and me and every human being to find our place together in

this flock we call the human race and to be healers and builders and to be able to trust that the Good Shepherd can give us tremendous courage not just for ourselves but to help others hear the voice of Jesus.

We, as the hands and feet of God in creation can be that companion to others in their dark moments of despair. It comes in a smile given to a weary neighbor, a hug offered to a child, an arm around shaking shoulders, taking that 1 am phone call from a friend suffering through the loss of a loved one or by sitting with a friend dealing with depression.

The proof of the resurrection is always the transformation that it causes in peoples' lives and when we realize that an awesome power has been released into the world. That's what Easter is about. A Shepherd who calls and invites us into a flock where we are known, loved, and put to work, and where he gives us the courage to follow where he leads. It's a place where everyone knows your name.

"I am the Good Shepherd," Jesus says. "I know my own, and my own know me."
Amen.