

*Pastor Jana Schofield
Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale, WA
Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 8, 2022
Acts 9:36-43; Ps. 23; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30*

Many of you know that Mike and I just returned from an amazing 2½ weeks in Europe where we did a 41-mile hiking tour in Portugal with 6 friends and then visited the Spanish cities of Córdoba, Granada, and Barcelona. Over the course of the whole trip, we averaged walking about 8 miles a day and saw stunning scenery, beautiful Moorish and Gothic architecture, and had delicious food and wine. It was a bucket-list trip for me to celebrate being a half-century old, that had been postponed a year due to COVID.

I was so glad that we arranged to do the self-guided hiking tour in Portugal with a company called Portugal Nature Trails. There is no way we could have navigated through the mountainous hills and along the coast and in the cities without the app that they provided for our phones. The app had a clear map and trail directions with an extremely accurate GPS marker of where you were on the trail. When you had to make a turn or head to different trail, the app would give you an optional audio cue that sounded like “Do (med)-do (low)-do (high).” And when you accidentally got off the route it would make a sound like “do(med)-do(low)” and then gently lead you back onto the trail.

But there were a few times we hikers would look at the map and think, you know, it looks like it would be a lot quicker if we went a different direction or cut off a certain part of the trail, and a few times we tried it. We of course got the “do(med)-do (low)” audio cue that we were off the route, but we just ignored it. Soon, however, we realized why the original map and directions were like they were. When we tried to go off-course, we found it neither quicker, nor easier. And sometimes it even led us to less stable or steeper trails.

Now, we always ended up getting to where we were headed, but it was harder, ended up being longer, wasn't nearly as beautiful, and was even a

bit more dangerous than the route we were supposed to take. If we had just listened to the audio cues and followed the route that had already been laid out for us, those parts of the hike would have been easier and far more enjoyable.

In the gospel today, Jesus was walking in the temple in Jerusalem during the Feast of Dedication, or what we know as the eight-day celebration of Hanukkah in December to commemorate the rededication of the temple after it had been defiled by the Greco-Syrian King Antiochus Epiphanies. At this point, Jesus had been in Jerusalem over the course of the last three chapters of John, starting with the Festival of Booths in September to celebrate the harvest and the end of the Israelites' exodus out of Egypt. In those few months between September and December, Jesus taught regularly in the temple, declared he was the Messiah, invited anyone who was thirsty to come to him, forgave a woman caught in adultery, declared that those who continued in his word would know the truth and the truth would make them free, healed a blind man, and promised that he had come so that *all* might have life, and have it abundantly.

And yet, when the Jews who had listened to him and watched him perform miracles over the course of those three months gathered around him in the portico of Solomon that day, they questioned him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly,” to which Jesus answered, “I have told you I am the Messiah, and you do not believe. ... My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.”

It's kind of like Jesus had laid out the path for them over the course of the last three months, with clear trail directions and an audio cue “do(med)-do(low)-do(high)” that signaled “go this way.” But some questioned the path Jesus laid out and wanted to go another direction. They thought it would be easier to follow a different way, to listen to another voice. They got the “do (med)-do (low)” cue from Jesus that they were off-trail, but they didn't get back on the path and kept trying to go their own way.

Now I want to be clear here that “the Jews” with whom Jesus was talking in this gospel were Jewish political leaders who were threatened by his authority and following. Immediately after verses in the gospel we heard today, these political leaders picked up stones and tried to stone Jesus and arrest him. This passage does not imply that all Jews at that time

were trying to kill Jesus nor that modern-day Jews are condemned because they aren't Christian.

What this passage does imply is that from the time he was in Jerusalem for those three months to the very moment we are living right now, Jesus has been giving every one of us cues—go this way, stay on this path, come follow me this direction, **because this is how you will experience abundant life.** We get those cues from scripture, from prayer, from the sacraments of baptism and holy communion, from Christian community, from the tug of the Holy Spirit on our hearts—and those cues lead us on a way that is more beautiful, easier, and less dangerous than a path that we would try to forge for ourselves.

Now I assume that all of us have people in our lives whom we worry about—those who don't go to church or perhaps have good reason to be skeptical about the church or about God. Perhaps we worry that they are “off the path” and wonder if they will somehow be condemned, and if we will bear some sort of responsibility for it.

What I want to remind us all about today is that just like when we tried to go off trail in Portugal but would still end up getting to our destination, those who are off trail will still end up in God's embrace, it just may not be as easy, as beautiful, or as abundant.

In the gospel, Jesus says “What my Father has given me is greater than all else and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand.” Do you realize that we all are sheep whom God has given to Jesus? It's not our belief that makes us sheep, it's God's grace that makes us sheep. A little later in John, John 15:16, Jesus says, “You did not choose me, but I chose you.” God chose you, Jesus chose you, and continues to choose those whom we love and worry about, those who may never step foot in a church, those who are desperate for the mercy and grace of God even if they don't yet respond to it.

And Jesus promises, no one can snatch them or you or anyone else out of God's hand. No one is able to undo what God has already done. That's what grace is, and it truly is amazing.

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, on this Mother's Day, may you be assured that your Mothering God has chosen you and keeps giving you cues in

water, word, wine, wheat, and community. Listen to and follow those cues, for they will lead you on the path of abundant life. Thanks be to God. Amen.