HOMILY FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER – A
May 7, 2017

When we look toward the ambo here during the season of Easter, one thing we can’t help noticing is this very large candle. At times, I have heard children say to their parents, “Wow, that’s a really big candle!” I also have seen children staring up at it with awe, wonder, and excitement. After all, it’s not every day that you see a candle like this. And this is the response that this big, beautiful candle is intended to evoke in all of us. But some of us, who have surrendered our childlike wonder for the sake of practicality, might find ourselves asking, “Do we really need such a big candle?” And I suspect that any of our deacons who have had to carry it around in lengthy processions might find themselves asking the same thing.

So why do we need such a big, beautiful candle anyway? Well, knowing what we call this candle tells us something about its significance. This is the paschal candle. The word paschal refers to the Passover, to that great feast of liberation which celebrates the freeing of the Hebrews from Egyptian bondage by the awesome power of God. By choosing Passover as the time of his dying and rising, Jesus wanted people to know that it was by the power unleashed by his cross and resurrection that our ultimate liberation, our freedom from bondage to sin and death has been made possible.

That is why this candle is lit for the first time on Holy Saturday night at the beginning of the Easter Vigil – that great liturgy which is at the very center of the Church’s life, celebrating our passing over from death to life in Christ. This candle reminds us that Christ, our light, is present among us – Christ, our light, who overcomes the darkness that threatens to overwhelm us – Christ, the one who will light the way for us to God’s eternal kingdom.

During the Great Fifty Days of Easter, this candle stands in the sanctuary and is lighted for all our liturgies. For it is in these Great Fifty Days, most of all, that we celebrate how the risen Christ goes before us, dispelling all darkness, lighting the way that leads to fullness of life forever. That’s what this great candle is all about. It is a beautiful image of what Christ means for us.

In our readings today, we were given other images for Christ that complement this one -- images that Jesus used to help people to understand who he is –images that reinforce what is symbolized by the paschal candle – the images of the gate of a sheepfold, and also that of a shepherd – a good shepherd.

So what does it mean when Jesus says he is the gate? Well, to understand this image it’s important to know how sheep were kept in Jesus’ day. At the end of a day, sheep were often led into sheepfolds – structures with stone walls and thistled roofs to protect the sheep from predators, both animal and human. To get into the sheepfold, the sheep had to pass through a gate which would then be shut to insure their protection.

So when Jesus speaks of himself as the gate, he is saying that he is present with us for our protection. But perhaps even more important in the long run, the gate is the door through which the sheep must pass if they are to be led to green pastures, where they will find the food and water that will nourish and sustain them. So when Jesus says he is the gate, he is also saying that it is through him that we have access to those green pastures that will nourish and sustain us in this life and for all eternity.

But, of course, if the sheep are going to find their way to those green pastures, they need someone to lead them. That’s why Jesus also uses the image of the shepherd to speak of himself. For this is what Jesus can and intends to do for us – lead us to those green pastures. But if this is going to happen, it is essential that we learn to recognize his voice, because there are many false shepherds in our world, who can lead us astray.

Now those who are familiar with sheep and shepherds know that sheep recognize the voice of their shepherd and will respond to no other. In fact, it is said that strangers, who intend to steal sheep for their own selfish purposes, even when dressed in the clothing of the sheep’s shepherd and attempting to imitate his call, cannot get sheep to follow him. Instead, they will run away. So if we are going to be as smart as
sheep, we will learn to recognize the voice of Jesus, the Good Shepherd who is constantly calling out to us, lest we get distracted and lose our way.

I have a friend who understands this very well. He went on a trip to Italy with a tour group several years ago. The group was touring an historic site in Rome and the place was packed. As they moved through this place, where many voices were speaking all at once, their tour guide kept talking to the group, telling them about one thing and another. Of course, the guide wanted them to know all the interesting things about that place. But most of all, the guide kept talking so that everyone in the group would hear her voice, stay together, and make their way safely through that mob of people. Well, my friend got distracted by something and stopped listening to the guide for a while. And before he knew it, his group was gone – nowhere to be found. And he was lost.

Thankfully, after some panic filled hours, he was finally able to make his way back to their hotel, where he was reunited with his group. But you’d better believe that from that time on he kept his attention focused on the voice of his tour guide. In fact, he began to focus so intently on that voice that he says that still today, he would recognize that voice anywhere. Well, if we are wise, we will do the same when it comes to Christ.

And what does the voice of our Good Shepherd sound like? That’s a good question, isn’t it? After all, he usually doesn’t speak to us as others do. But he does speak to us nonetheless – mostly through inner promptings, insights and inspirations, and through the voices of others who speak his words. And if we get to know Christ well, we will recognize when he is speaking to us in these various ways.

I think it works something like this: I have a friend who, following surgery, had a tube down her nose and throat so she didn’t sound anything like herself. Still, by the particular things she said, if you had put her in a line up and blindfolded me, I would have been able to pick her out every time. For while the sound of her speech was different, the stuff of her speech was the same as always.

So it is with Christ. As we are traveling along life’s way, in the midst of all the words that bombard us day after day, we will hear words coming to us like, “Do onto others as you would have them do unto you.” “Stop judging.” “Turn the other cheek.” “Forgive.” “The greatest among you will be the servants of all.” “Love the Lord your God with all you heart, soul, strength, and mind.” “Whatever you do for those in need — for the least of my brothers and sisters -- you do for me.”

As we journey through life, we will find such words coming to us again and again. And though we may not always recognize the sound of his speaking, anyone who journeys very long with Christ will know who it is that is speaking to them. For what he speaks is so clear, and so consistent, and so like him, that there is no mistaking it.

And lest we forget how important it is to learn to recognize and respond to the voice of the Good Shepherd, we have this candle here to remind us why it is so essential that we do. For Christ is the conquering Son, the light that no darkness can overcome. And as long as we remain with him, we will have life.

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