

April 22, 2018
The Fourth Sunday of Easter
e Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Acts 4:5-12
Psalm 23
1 John 3:16-24
John 10:11-18

Do you know that Wednesday is National DNA Day? Do you know there even *is* a National DNA Day?

I first learned about it just this past Friday. Apparently National DNA Day takes place annually on April 25. That's the day in 1953 that the journal *Nature* published papers by Watson, Crick, and others about the double-helix structure of DNA. The first National DNA Day was celebrated on the 50th anniversary of that milestone. And on that day, April 25, 2003, researchers announced that the Human Genome Project was essentially complete.

In the U.S., National DNA Day celebrations are sponsored by the National Human Genome Research Institute, which is part of the National Institutes of Health. Their website, www.genome.gov, offers this: "April 2018 will mark the 15th anniversary of the completion of the Human Genome Project. To commemorate this milestone and the genomic advances that have been made since 2003, the National Human Genome Research Institute (NHGRI) has launched the '15 for 15' Celebration—unveiling 15 ways that genomics has and will continue to transform our world."¹ Starting April 5, the NHGRI has rolled out a subject a day. Its April 10 installment was titled, "Human Origins and Ancestry: Illuminating human and family origins at the genomic level."²

Coincidentally, I had been pondering "human and family origins" for a couple of weeks, ever since I picked up the April issue of *National Geographic* magazine. It's a special issue that they call "The Race Issue." A good chunk of it has to do, directly or tangentially, with genetics. On the cover is a photograph of two girls. The one on the left has pink skin, wavy dirty-blonde hair, and green eyes; our culture would identify her as white. The one on the right has brown, kinky black hair, and brown eyes; our culture would identify her as black. The words on the cover say this: "Black and White: These twin sisters make us rethink everything we know about race."³

The issue begins with the editor's examination of the *National Geographic's* sometimes horribly racist content of the past. She notes, for example, that "In a full-issue article on Australia that ran in 1916, aboriginal Australians were called 'savages' who 'rank lowest in intelligence of all human beings.'"⁴ The issue continues with the article about the twelve-year-old twins, children of an interracial couple.

The article that popped into my mind because of National DNA Day is one about current scientific knowledge regarding the origins of human beings and their migration around the globe. It's pretty amazing, really, this thing I'm now reading is called the "human diaspora."

Every human being belongs to the species *Homo sapiens*, which emerged in a single location in East Africa. Our common ancestors began to wander relatively recently. They reached easternmost Europe only 43,000 years ago. In Europe they intermingled with some remaining Neanderthals, therefore most people of European descent carry some Neanderthal DNA. Around 2Another branch spread across Asia and around 20,000 were poised to cross the land bridge to North America. As the branches of the human tree moved farther from home in east Africa, they evolved genetic adaptations appropriate to the different climate.

Let's reinforce this: all human beings, in all our diversity, came from common east African ancestors, evolving into most of our amazing diversity over the course of just a few tens of thousands of years. In light of all that, we might ponder our current conversations about race and immigration. Maybe it helps to imagine human beings starting out as one big flock of sheep, from which a few sheep started to wander.

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. Here's a bit of liturgical minutia: the Season of Easter, also known as Eastertide lasts for 50 days, from Easter Day through the Day of Pentecost. Therefore Eastertide includes a total of nine Sundays: Easter Sunday, the Day of Pentecost, and the seven Sundays in between. Today is the fourth Sunday of Easter. Every year on the fourth Sunday of Easter our Gospel reading is a portion of John 10. In John 10, Jesus goes on about sheep for so long that we can spread his speech into three complete parts. Today, it being lectionary year B, we heard the second of the three parts.

The pastoral imagery of John 10 would have been seriously relatable to its early listeners. Sheep were valuable asset, sources of meat and milk and wool and pelts. A poor family that owned sheep would keep them nearby—the sheepfold would have literally been attached to the house.

John 10 echoes the words of Psalm 23. I can't imagine how many times I've said Psalm 23 with parishioners who are ill or dying: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters."

These are some of the most beautiful words in the Bible. I wonder, though, whether they are so well-worn that we don't hear them until we're in dire straits. Maybe part of being a good Christian is learning how to really hear those words—for your one's own well-being, and for the well-being of others.

I found the Episcopal Church in the fall of the year 2000 after a fraught prior relationship with Christianity. I knew the Episcopal Church was where I belonged, but it still wasn't simple. Returning to Christianity, I had to reconcile with its history—history both personal and institutional, history related to homophobia and sexism and racism. It wasn't always easy. Fortunately, in the Episcopal Church, I found a place where I could do this with integrity.

And so it occurs to me that, if Lent is about reconciling oneself to God, maybe Easter is about the Church reconciling itself to us. That happens when the members of the Church have claimed their place in its past, its present, and its future—it happens when the seeds they have thus sown begin to shoot forth from the soil.

You may have noticed that I've been preaching a bit more often lately. That's been mainly because our other preachers have been less available. Still, the timing was good. You all have been asked to help the Vestry discern whether the congregation is ready to call a new rector. And so I've been trying to preach in ways that connect to that question. You've done your part, and the next steps are up to the Vestry. So let me say this, just to make it clear: If you're looking for the Good News, if you're looking for the Gospel, all you have to do is look around. *You* are the Good News. You are the embodied, empowered, and commissioned body of Christ. You are lamb, sheep, and shepherd. You are faith, hope, and love.

My hope for St. Thomas's is pretty simple: I hope that we are a healthy community of followers of Jesus Christ. The first thing most people think about when you say "healthy congregation" is financial health, and that's related to attendance. So let me get this out of the way: I want us to be financially healthy, because financial health is necessary only in that it allows us to be healthy in other ways. I want us to have new members, but *not* just to shore up our numbers and our finances.

By healthy I mean something else. I mean that we are held together by bonds of affection that override any disagreements we may have. By healthy I mean that we are seeking together always to hear what God is saying to us in this moment, in this place, at this time. By healthy I mean that we open the doors and the windows to see what's going on outside, and to integrate all that information into our lives of faith. By healthy I mean that we are a place that helps people to grow in their relationships with God, and thereby to grow in their relationships with all of God's creation. By healthy I mean that we live in both contemplation and action—that is, that we are both spiritual and religious—and that we explore what that means. By healthy I mean that we have a "family system" that balances bone and sinew, so that it is both strong and flexible, both steady and changeable, because that's what it takes to adjust continually to new circumstances, be it new people here or new needs out there. By healthy I mean that we continue to challenge ourselves to continue to understand what it takes to be radically welcoming, and also to risk taking that into the world as radical justice-seeking.

The Episcopal Church mandates that dioceses require its clergy to participate in continuing education and record that participation. Therefore, clergy of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut annually submit a reporting form. My form last year included at least one unlikely item: a "behind the scenes" tour of the collections at Yale Peabody Museum. The Peabody occasionally offers these free tours; when the email blast comes out, you have to be quick to reply, because the couple of dozen spots fill up in a snap.

I managed to reserve a spot in a tour last November. During the days leading up to it, I was ridiculously excited about it. When you enroll, you don't know which areas you'll visit. This seems only to have increased my sense of anticipation.

As it turned out, we visited vertebrate zoology and invertebrate paleontology, getting about half hour in each collection. Invertebrate paleontology was first. I was keeping my excitement under control until the student tour guide pulled out a drawer with a huge, two-foot-diameter ammonite fossil. [Here's an ammonite fossil I bought, well before that tour, down at Books & Co. in Whitneyville. It's not the only one I own.] To the point of age, ammonites evolved into existence around 400 million years ago. They went extinct with the dinosaurs around 65 million years ago. This is a fossil of an organism that lived at least 65 million years ago. If you'd like one more time marker, the age of the universe is set at the time of the Big Bang, which took place 14 billion years ago.

Christianity at one time supported the idea that people of African ancestry were somehow less than human. In a wonderful irony, one might say that they are the most human of all. Remember, human beings reached Western Europe only 43,000 years ago. That's no so far ahead of the emergence of our sacred texts. Scholars suppose that Psalm 23 was written about 3000 years ago. And of course the Gospels were written about 2000 years ago.

If you're looking for a vision of where we're going as a congregation, let me just say that I am, too. I think we're supposed to do what we're supposed to do, *and* to try not to hold too tightly to our expectations about exactly what it will all end up looking like. The best I can say is that I hope it's both as simple as a Little Free Library and as grand as this huge stone building. I hope it's both as old as this ammonite and as new as this flower.

Notes

¹ '15 for 15' Celebration: Fifteen ways genomics is now influencing our world," National Human Genome Research Institute, April 2018, available online at <https://www.genome.gov/27570876/15-for-15-celebration/> (accessed April 21, 2018).

² "Human Origins and Ancestry: Illuminating human and family origins at the genomic level," National Human Genome Research Institute, April 10, 2018, available online at <https://www.genome.gov/27570933/april-10-human-origins-and-ancestry/> (accessed April 21, 2018).

³ National Geographic, April 2018.

⁴ Ibid., from the Editor's introduction, 6-7.