

April 25, 2021
The Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year B
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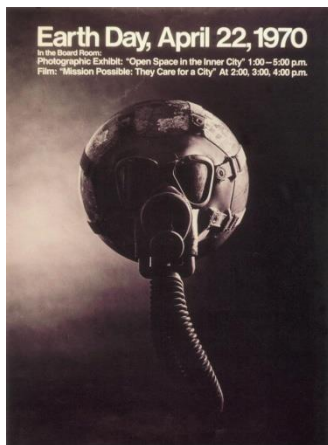
Acts 4:5-12
Psalm 23
1 John 3:16-24
John 10:11-18

Today let's begin with a video clip.¹

[Play from beginning through Cronkite's intro, 1:45]

That was a report about the very first Earth Day in 1970. My family was devoted to Walter Cronkite, so I might have seen it then, but I don't remember it—I was only eight years old. I do remember feeling the sense of impending catastrophe that it evokes. That portion of my childhood was filled with stories real and imagined of environmental devastation and nuclear apocalypse. As a child I had a terrible recurring nightmare in which the air was so bad that my family lived in our attic—for some reason the air there okay. To leave, you had to wear a gas mask. Out in public, there were breathing stations that looked like parking meters spaced along the sidewalks. If your gas mask petered out, you could hold your breath and run from station to station. There were hardly any other people on the streets, because they were huddled in their attics.

I don't know where that dream came from, but maybe it's this:



Again, I don't remember seeing it in 1970, but I might have. Now it shows up when I Google Earth Day. It's an advertising poster for an associated art show. Seeing it still gives me a gut punch of terror.

The timing of Earth Day on April 22 does not seem to have been in sync with the Christian liturgical calendar. In 1970 and 2021, it occurred within a few days of *this* liturgical Sunday, the Fourth Sunday of Easter. Maybe that's coincidentally auspicious. Today is Good Shepherd Sunday, so named because it's the Sunday traditionally designated for the Good Shepherd reading from the Gospel of John.

I searched for the reason why Good Shepherd Sunday is the Fourth Sunday of Easter, or why it was originally the Third Sunday of Easter. I didn't find a firm answer but I did discover, to my complete lack of surprise, a possible pagan connection. According to Wikipedia, "The **Parilia** is an ancient Roman festival of rural character performed annually on 21 April, aimed at cleansing both sheep and shepherd. It is carried out in acknowledgment to the Roman deity Pales, a deity of uncertain gender who was a patron of shepherds and sheep."² Here's one fanciful depiction of the Parilia by an eighteenth-century Flemish artist:³



There are at least a couple of ways to interpret the frequent alignments of the pagan and Christian calendars. Maybe nascent Christianity found it necessary to accommodate the majority religion. Or maybe nascent Christianity, like its predecessor religions, was sensitive enough to incorporate the natural rhythms to which all living things are subject. It's only in relatively recent history that so many humans have had the option to ignore those rhythms. Technology has given humans the capacity to claim the dominion over nature supposedly promised in Genesis. Humans have done so with gusto—and the results have been calamitous. The Earth is being marked, and so are we.

If you go looking for Biblical passages in which Jesus tells his followers to care for the Earth, you'll come up short. To be fair to Jesus, this was probably something he didn't realize he needed to say. For one thing, humanity hadn't yet developed its potential for environmental devastation. For another, Jesus, like everyone else, would have by necessity lived his entire life in close relationship with nature. Imagine that. Aside from a few excursions on the Sea of Galilee and one donkey ride into Jerusalem, Jesus walked every place he went. He ate food produced locally and organically. He didn't need Marie Kondo's help to declutter: aside from his clothes, he had few possessions. The dwellings where he sheltered were less like the hermetically sealed houses of today and more like what we would experience camping.

Today's reading from John is a referenced to Ezekiel 34. There, God commands Ezekiel to prophesy to the leaders of Israel with words including these: "Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep."⁴ And these: "I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice."⁵ Seemingly in response, John's Jesus says this: "I am the good shepherd."⁶ Just a bit later he will add: "The Father and I are one."⁷ This passage intends to tell us something about Jesus, and about who Jesus is in relationship to God.

It's tempting, especially for us clergy, to try to step in as real-time shepherds of the sheep. We really should avoid that. Remember last week, in John 21, three times we heard Jesus tell Peter to care for Jesus' sheep. Jesus doesn't say they're Peter's sheep, or that Peter is the new shepherd. Peter might be an ovine standout, but he's still very much one among the sheep.

Of course, we are, too. Each one of us is one among the sheep. But it's not so bad being sheep if you have a good shepherd. With that good shepherd, we can focus on being agreeable sheep, sheep that belong to the flock without tormenting other sheep or hoarding grass, sheep that actually follow the shepherd, who has already brought them to the kingdom of heaven.

Let's get back to the video I started with. When I first watched it this week, I was surprised by how relevant it felt. The environmental situation was dire then, and it's dire now. We should feel at least a little terrified about the prospects for the future of the earth and its inhabitants. But we should also remember that the original environmental movement did yield important results. The air got clearer. The water got cleaner. Yes, a lot was missed. But it's not too late to fix it. We just have to follow the *good* shepherd.

In this place at this time of year, nature seems to be shouting for attention, and through it God seems to be begging for praise. In response, we raise our sheepish bleats to heaven, with vows to bless this Earth, and to keep it.

Notes

¹ CBS News Special with Walter Cronkite about Earth Day 1970, available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=WbwC281uzUs> (accessed April 25, 2021).

² "Parilia," Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parilia#:~:text=The%20Parilia%20is%20an%20ancient,patron%20of%20shepherds%20and%20sheep>. (accessed April 25, 2021).

³ "Festa di Pales, o L'estate" (1783) by Joseph-Benoît Suvée. Available from "Parlia" on Wikipedia.

⁴ Ezekiel 34:2b-3 NRSV.

⁵ Ezekiel 34:16 NRSV.

⁶ John 10:11a NRSV.

⁷ John 10:30 NRSV.