Acts 2:42–47

**Other Lessons:** Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19–25; John 10:1–10

Acts chapter 2 is often associated with Pentecost rather than Easter. Some may wonder why the first reading is not from the Old Testament that talks about the resurrection promise. And you may also wonder how this text have anything to do with the theme for today, which is Jesus the good shepherd.

Indeed, during the Easter season, various chapters of Acts are read instead of the Old Testament because these events from Pentecost are the direct outcome of Easter. Easter celebration is not only looking at the joys and amazement of the women that morning, or the awe that filled the disciples that evening when Jesus suddenly appeared to them, and then perhaps try to relate to them and their experiences distantly. Rather, it is all about the new life that comes from the resurrection of Jesus and it is not an abstract idea, but it is shown and displayed in the very lives of the apostles and all those who believed in their witnesses. It is, as Paul calls it in Romans 1, the “power of the gospel” that transforms lives. Thus the readings in Acts slowly prepare the whole church for the upcoming season of Pentecost, where today and everyday of our lives this power of the gospel continues to change our us from inside out.

This then also explains why it is chosen for Good Shepherd Sunday, how Acts 2 is about the good shepherd, for the Christians 2000 years ago, and also for us today in 2017. By pairing these readings together, we are to see and learn that Jesus is the shepherd through the Church, that he calls, gathers, and enlightens all people through the Church. Or in other words, hearing the Good Shepherd, following him is shown and exemplified by these passages. The point is for us to be faithful in hearing the call of the shepherd so that we are not led astray or away by thieves and robbers and wolves who pretend to be part of the flock. Certainly these are not “formulas” of growth or success, but rather, not doing these things shows unbelief and disdain for the words and commands and promises of Jesus.

It all starts with baptism (not part of our selected readings for today, but it was part of the reading from last week and it’s the precursor to the activities in v42-47), as Peter said to the crowd, “repent and be baptized”. This also is a gift from the Good Shepherd by which he brings the lost sheep into the fold, so that he can daily and richly feed me with grace and mercy and all his blessings. The life of the Christian begins there from the church and continues to live in the church, not in the sense of habiting inside the church building, but that the sheep receives nourishment and life in the green pasture called the church. And that’s what we see in our first reading today.

First, the sheep devote themselves to the hearing the word of God (v42) through the sacred scriptures (=OT) and the teachings of the apostles (=NT). This is how the sheep learn to discern the voice of their shepherd. This is how one learns truth from falsehood and lies. There are indeed countless warnings against false prophets and false teachers and false teachings throughout the bible (both OT and NT) precisely because it is dangerous to the faith and the soul. And that’s what the devil and the world is after, your very soul, your eternal home, your eternal comfort and peace and joy. The lies are enticing and they are often mixed with half-truths from the bible, but the Christian who has learned to treasure and keep the word in his heart is like the wise person who builds his house on THE rock so that rain and winds and floods cannot destroy it.

With the word of God properly taught and received, it brings the sheep into the one flock, into fellowship with one another (v42). And notice here that the word “and” is used only to separate 3 items: teaching, fellowship, prayers, but not between fellowship and the breaking of the bread. This is to mean that fellowship is expressed and found by the breaking of the bread, which is Luke’s way of say the Lord's Supper, and hence also the other common name that we use: “Holy Communion”. It is not only communing with Christ through the body and the blood, but we are communing with one another as one body of Christ. This is how the shepherd feeds us, by the word and the sacraments, to nourish and strengthen our faith. By continually receiving his gifts, we can be more and more certain of his love for us, his abundance grace in the forgiveness of sins. This is how faith is increased.

And finally, since we have been taught the word, received his sacraments, the logical and natural response is prayer. Since God has not only taught us his prayers (as in the lord’s prayer, the psalms, etc) but has also through faith taught us that we have a heavenly father who is ready to hear and to give, we simply pray. We pray individually and corporately together with all the saints. In prayer, we give thanks and praise for all that he has done and continues to do for us.

And so this is how the Good Shepherd leads his flock to the green pasture and giving them rest and peace and comfort in the midst of the valley of shadow of death, and prepares a table in the presence of our enemies. It is all done through the church, particularly on Sundays where we have the reading of scriptures, breaking of bread, and prayer (though not necessarily in that specific order of course). The church has recognized that these are the basic elements that should be done regularly. These are things that define a church, the body of Christ here on earth, the flock of sheep who hears the voice of their master.

But the leading of the shepherd does not end there. Luke records that the apostles performed wonders and signs so that more people may believe (but this is mainly for the Jews who believed in the Old Testament since the signs are confirmation of OT prophecies). And for the non-apostles they lead godly lives in love for their neighbor. This is shown when they sold their possessions and shared and distributed with the needy. This is the sheep hearing the call of their shepherd to love their neighbors as themselves and they follow with full confidence and gladness. And notice that none of these are done out of fear of wrath of God, nor are they “repaying” God for what he has done for them, since it is not possible to repay that gift, which is the life of his own son Jesus Christ. But all these good works are simply the outflow of faith that comes from the abundance of Christ.

In essence Jesus’s work as a shepherd never ends, although it must be perceived and received by faith. For he comes to us through the church, through the word, through the sacraments, in order to bless and preserve us unto the end. And so it is our daily exercise to examine ourselves to see if we are still in this flock, whether we are still hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd, whether we recognize it, whether we are faithfully receiving his feeding and care, and whether that faith produces any fruits. And we need to daily examine ourselves to see if the world or the devil has enticed us, whether our own sin has deluded us. And when we find ourselves wandering outside this fold, there is always a way back, it is called repentance. Luke 15 describes this repentance as the shepherd actively seeking that one single lost sheep. Repentance means to see that the shepherd is willing to seek us out even though we have not been very faithful or good at listening to him or loving our neighbor. He comes and turns us around and carries us back. This is a wonderful gift that we find in baptism where we may die and rise with Christ to be a new person again. And once again we are back in the flock where the shepherd feeds us and nourishes us with his gifts in the church. Let us hold fast, like these first Christians in Acts 2, to all the words and teachings so that we may be kept faithful until the very end.