Fourth Sunday of Easter

Ps. 23 1 Pet.2:19-25 John 10:1-10

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church 5-3-20

If there is one **sentence** in all of the New Testament that best describes the purpose of Jesus' presence in the unfolding story of God's creating, liberating, saving love, it would be the last sentence in our Gospel text from John this morning… The one that says, in Jesus words, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they, *my sheep,* might have **life**, and have it abundantly."

And if there is one **word** in that sentence that shines above all the rest in regards to Jesus' purpose, it would be the word "life," translated from the Greek word **"Zoe"…**

The thing is, in English we have just one word to use when we want to speak of "life," while in Greek, the language in which the New Testament was originally written, there are three: one of them being ***'bios,'*** meaning life in its outward appearances and manifestations; the root from which the English word "biology" comes… A second Greek word for "life" being ***"psyche,"*** used when referring to the inner life of thinking, feeling, willing and choosing, the root from which the English word "psychology" comes…

And the third Greek word being ***"zoe",*** which is used 127 times in the New Testament, far outnumbering the uses of either **"bios"** or **"psyche'… "Zoe"** being a beautiful and complex word… impossible to define in a bumper sticker sort of way… A word pointing to a "**kind of life**" that is not often understood or valued in our world and our culture…

A kind of life that I can best speak of by going by way of the little green frogs called "peepers"… Peepers being those little frogs that sing in low-lying areas and ponds in our neck of the woods when finally spring comes… Peepers starting out, like all frogs, as tadpoles, which means they must lose their tails and gills before becoming air-breathing, full-singing, frog-hopping peepers; requiring them in other words, to "die to their tadpole ways" in order to become part of the "Peepers' Choir of Praise"…

Meaning that if Jesus had lived in Downeast Maine instead of Palestine, he might have said it this way when speaking about the **"zoe" kind of life** he had come to make known in the world… He might have said it this way…

Unless a tadpole stills its gills and dies to

underwater ways,

It remains a silent voice in the choir of "Peeper

Praise."

But if it lets go of gills, takes a chance and takes

a breath,

It will find a song inside where it feared was

only death.

And then, oh then, what once was still will lift

its voice to heaven above,

Filling falling darkening dusk with God's Easter

song of love.

At first glance, the ***zoe*** kind of life sounds like something we'd all choose for ourselves if given the chance. Who wouldn't want to live life **abundantly**? Who wouldn't want to be part of the "choir of peeper praise," especially after hearing the peeper choirs sing in all their glory in every pond and low-lying area of Maine these days? It seems like such an easy choice to make…

And yet, as the "Downeast version" of the **Zoe** kind of life makes clear, the move from "tadpole ways" to "peeper praise" requires a stilling of gills, a dying to underwater ways… It requires a letting go of what one is accustomed to, the taking of a chance in the taking of a breath, to find a song of praise inside where it feared was only death…. And as any of us who have ever tried to die to old ways knows, it is not easy…

Which is, I think, why Jesus spoke of the entrance into such a life as a gate… and of himself as the gate itself… A metaphor I struggled with for a long time because it sounded so exclusive to me, and restrictive, with Jesus standing at the entrance to the sheepfold with his arms crossed, granting access to this **zoe kind of life** only to those "sheep" who somehow "qualified" …

Which as an image couldn't be farther from what John the Gospel writer was trying to say… But an image nonetheless that was difficult for me to dispel, until one day a number of years ago, when an old Lutheran pastor friend of mine told me a story about a different gate… a story that helped me finally to understand what John's Jesus meant when he said that **"abundant life"** came by way of him, the gate into the **zoe** kind of life…

So my old Lutheran pastor friend, who grew up out in the farmlands of western Minnesota, told the story this way…

There was a farmer in the county where my friend grew up who farmed the land his father and grandfather had farmed before him. This man was known for his many decades of careful farming practices, his deep love of the land, his generosity to neighbors, to the local school, and to his church. He was known especially for the way he supported the local sports programs for kids, driving miles to attend baseball and basketball games to cheer "his kids" on. There wasn't anyone in the area who had deeper roots in that place than this old farmer….

No one was surprised then that he was very upset when the state decided to take part of his farm through eminent domain for the building of a highway. No one was surprised that he attended every meeting about that plan, speaking against it, questioning the need for a bigger better highway system in that place… No one was surprised that he wrote letters to the editor and to his representatives in state government in an attempt to stop the project.

But everyone was very surprised, when, after the project got final approval from the county and state boards, this old farmer went into his barn one evening, the place where he had spent his entire life putting up hay and fixing tractors and milking cows… He went into the bran he loved, and hung himself. Indeed, everyone was shocked and in mourning…

So, as my pastor friend tells the story, the elders at the old farmer's Lutheran Church, the congregation in which he had grown up and to which he had dedicated so much of his time and resources… the elders in the church met with the new pastor, fresh out of seminary, to plan the farmer's funeral…

And at that planning session they told the pastor he could use any prayers he wanted to use during the service… He could use any hymns, say anything he wanted to say… But after the service in the sanctuary was over, they told him, the pallbearers would carry the casket out the church door, across the church yard to the cemetery… and there, they would lift the old farmer **over the fence** that encircled the cemetery because, as was the long-held custom in that church (in keeping with their firm understanding that God does not forgive those who commit suicide; in keeping with their firm understanding that the gates of heaven are permanently closed to those who take their own lives)…the church elders said they could not and would not allow the casket carrying such a sinner go through the cemetery gate…

So, as my friend told the story, on the day of the funeral, after the service in the sanctuary was over, after the pallbearers had carried the casket down the church steps, across the church yard, and over to the cemetery, the young pastor, much to the surprise of the church elders, led the funeral procession past the place where the pallbearers were to lift the casket over the fence, and instead led them to the open gate, and there (summoning all the courage it takes to defy a bunch of church people bent on living out of a rule book and traditions that serve to justify their own viewpoints and judgments), there the young pastor

declared with a strong unwavering voice to all those assembled, **"Today we shall be going through the gate."**

And while my friend didn't say how the church elders felt about their new pastor's declaration, they did as he said, because really, everyone in town was there that morning, so how could they do otherwise?…

But what I like to imagine is that at least some of those church elders saw in that moment "the gate that is Jesus" not as a gate of exclusion, but as a gate that has **no conditions** for entrance no matter what **condition** we may be in…

What I like to imagine is that some of them realized that "the gate that is Jesus" **is like the view finder on a camera with a wide-angle lens…** that the way to **see** and to **be** part of the kingdom of God (on earth as it is in heaven) is to **look** through, to **go through** the impossible, improbable gate of grace, compassion and wild, wide-angled love **that is Jesus, the good shepherd of the sheep**… leaving behind us anything that gets in our way… leaving behind the voices of the thieves and bandits who would entice us to hold onto our judgmental hearts, our narrow visions, our tadpole ways; those enticements that seek to steal all of our chances for living a **zoe kind of life…** (Ask old Scrooge, and I think he will agree)…

What I like to imagine is that while those church elders were in the church basement for lunch after the funeral was over, they looked around and saw the beauty, the vulnerability, the resiliency, the **tenderness** and **woundedness** and **belovedness** of everyone in that room and beyond, including themselves… and in that seeing, recognized the kind of life our faith calls "***zoe"….***

Abundant life… the kind of life wherein we are "stretched apart by love"… killed and made alive by love… Eastered by love into a new creation, just as Paul speaks of in Romans 6 as he writes, "We were buried with Christ through baptism into death, so just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so shall we walk in newness of **zoe."**

This is what I like to imagine for those church elders, just as it is what I like to imagine for myself… Because the truth is, much of time I am like those Minnesota Lutheran Church guys, holding onto my small-hearted ideas of who should be allowed through the gate into the wideness of God's mercy… Much of the time I'm just as happy to stay a tadpole… Because you know, dying to the old ways is hard, and sometimes it hurts, because love often does…

But the truth is, the kind of life that is **zoe** is the kind of life that bids us come and die…Because as odd as it might sound, it is in **dying to all that keeps us from living into and out of the wild, wide-angled love of God made known in Jesus that there is hope for fullness of live, abundant life… zoe…**

Of course we can't do this dying to the old life and rising into the new on our own. Left to our own devices we'd pretty much keep our gills intact and our "rules for entering the

sheepfold" at the ready… So perhaps we might simply consider a bit of wisdom shared by Jewish scholar and philosopher Martin Buber, who writes,

"*After the leader's death, his disciples came together and talked about the things he had done. When it was Rabbi Zalmann's turn, he asked them. 'Do you know why our master went to the pond every day at dawn and stayed there for a while before coming home again?' They did not know why. Rabbi Zalmann continued. 'He was learning the song with which the frogs praise God. It takes a very long time to learn that song."*

It takes a very long time to learn that song, and a lot of dying… It takes remembering again and again and again the unconditional, fierce and tender love from which we have come and in which we are eternally held… It takes looking up from wherever we are and seeing the beauty, the vulnerability, the resiliency, the tenderness and wounded-ness and beloved-ness of every person and creature in the world God so loves… It takes letting go of gills and taking a chance on breath…

But dear friends, in the midst of such terrifyingly beautiful devastation of our old selves, here is the promise… **In the presence of the love that will not let us go, we will be changed… And we will know the *zoe,* the fullness of life, to which God calls us now and ever shall be, world without end, amen…**

And in knowing that… in knowing that… We will come to know that when Jesus said he came so that we might have life and have it abundantly, what he was saying was this…

Unless a tadpole stills its gills and dies to

underwater ways,

It remains a silent voice in the choir of "Peeper

Praise."

But if it lets go of gills, takes a chance and takes

a breath,

It will find a song inside where it feared was

only death.

And then, oh then, what once was still will lift

its voice to heaven above,

Filling falling darkening dusk with God's Easter

song of love.

May we learn from the peeper choirs that even now are singing God's Easter song of love from the ponds and low-lying areas of Downeast Maine… May we learn from them *how to let go of gills, to take a chance and take a breath, so to find a song inside where we feared was only death.* May we go down to the pond and learn from them…

In the name of Jesus, the great Shepherd of the Sheep…

In the name of Jesus, the impossible, improbable gate of grace through which we pass into the wild, wide-angled love of God…

In the name of Jesus, the lamb who taught us that it is by dying that we are raised into the **Zoe kind of life…**

In the name of Jesus, the great Peeper himself. Amen.