**First Reading Acts 4: 5-12**

*Peter and John had been arrested the previous day because they were proclaiming the news of the resurrection to the people. In today’s reading, Peter is filled with the Holy Spirit so that he can proclaim salvation in Jesus’ name to the religious authorities.*

5The next day [the] rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, 6with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. 7When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, “By what power or by what name did you do this?” 8Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, 9 if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, 10let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. 11This Jesus is ‘the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.’ 12There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.”

**Psalm 23**

**Second Reading 1 John 3: 16-24**

*Jesus’ death on our behalf is the clearest demonstration of divine love. This is the very love we share with others, not just through our words but especially through our deeds. In sharing such love we fulfill God’s commandments.*

16We know love by this, that [Jesus Christ] laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. 17How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? 18Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. 19And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him 20whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. 21Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; 22and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him. 23And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.

24All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

**Gospel John 10:11-18**

*In language that recalls the twenty-third psalm, Jesus describes himself as the shepherd who cares for his sheep. He is willing to die for them, and he is able to overcome death for them.*

[Jesus said:] 11“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 14I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 16I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. 17For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 18No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

**Sermon**

 Where do you belong? Belonging is an important aspect of our lives, particularly as we go through changes in our lives. When we are kids, we generally feel like we belong in our families. Those who come from broken up families may struggle to find somewhere to belong. As teenagers and then as young adults, as we begin to observe what makes us unique, we start to search for places of belonging. Hopefully our families can be that place for us, but not everyone is that fortunate. Whenever we move away from what has always been familiar, we start all over again, seeking out those places and people with whom we feel at home.

 There are times in life in which belonging is more of a struggle. When we move far away. When we change jobs or retire. When our kids graduate from high school and suddenly there’s no more flurry of activity or when they move out. When we experience divorce or the loss of a spouse or the loss of a number of friends from our peer group. There are a number of situations, a number of circumstances, a number of reasons why we might struggle with the question of where, if anywhere, we belong. From the story of creation, we know that we were

created to be social creatures, so belonging, being connected and at home somewhere is an important aspect of our lives.

 Today’s gospel passage touches on the question of belonging, but it requires us to know something about the story in Chapter 9, since Jesus’s teaching in Chapter 10 is based on it. Chapter 9 is the story of Jesus healing a man who was blind from birth. Due to the fact that the man was blind from birth, he was never able to work to support himself. As a result, he had to beg because he has no other means of support. He was treated as an outcast because the religious leaders taught the people and acted as though those who suffered from these kinds of disabilities or illnesses were being punished for sin committed by themselves or their parents. As a result of this teaching, people like this man blind from birth were left to be punished because hey, if that’s what God was doing, why would anyone get in the way?

But Jesus heals the Man Born Blind, which not only frees him from his ailment, but also allows him to have a place in society and in his faith community. Yet a problem arises when he presents himself to the religious leaders of his community. All of a sudden, they are concerned about who had the proper authority to heal this man. They argue with the Man Born Blind and they don’t like his answers, so they cast him out…again.

So here lies the problem…when God called God’s people to be God’s people, God didn’t make exceptions. God didn’t say, ‘I will be your God and you will be my people…except for the blind, the lame, the deaf, the poor, the widows and the orphans.’ These were all God’s people! So why, over time, did the people in charge decide that some people didn’t belong? That’s not what God intended. But it had its effect…people like the man who was blind from birth were not allowed to belong and lived an isolated life.

Jesus came to correct that understanding. And let me be clear to say that the man didn’t need to be healed to belong. He belonged because he was one of God’s people regardless of his physical state. The religious leaders remained very resistant to allowing this man to belong even after he was healed. And so, Jesus teaches about what he is doing; Jesus is the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep, who knows his own, who speaks, and his sheep know his voice. The good shepherd doesn’t scatter or drive away the sheep…he calls to them, he seeks to find them, he gathers, welcomes them into the fold. The good shepherd

specifically concerns himself with the perishing, the wandering, the injured, all of those who suffer. The hired hands did not care.

The ministry of Jesus is drawing all people into relationship with him, into relationship with God. The image of the good shepherd is one way of understanding this. Like a good shepherd, Jesus seeks those who have felt for a long time like they have nowhere to belong. Jesus calls to those who have been cast out, who have told they don’t belong. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus laid down his life for all people, both Jew and Gentile and his ministry continues to be to gather all of humanity into one flock in relationship with our Creator.

When we are called by Christ into relationship with our Creator, we become part of the flock. That means that our relationship with God is a communal experience that brings us into relationship with one another. And here is where we find where we belong, no matter what phase of life we’re in, what unfortunate circumstance has come upon us, what our physical or mental capabilities may be. Through Christ, we belong to God and Christ’s ministry belongs to us. As long as the church exists, there will always be a place for people to find a sense of belonging, as long as the church is aligned with the work of the good shepherd…seeking to find and gather those scattered or cast out…being concerned with the perishing, the wandering, the injured, all of those who suffer or are forgotten. Amen.

**Bloom Where You Are Planted**