Worship Resources for April 21st—Fourth Sunday after Easter

Revised Common Lectionary: Acts 9:36-43; Psalm 23: John 10:22-30; Revelation 7:9-17

In Acts, as we read of the early church, we have this wonderful story of Dorcas, also known as Tabitha, who dies and is resurrected. But more importantly, she is called a disciple of Jesus. It is clear through Luke-Acts that women did have important roles in early Christian history (although some scholars are skeptical that the author was pro-women altogether, as the women are often reduced to supportive roles at times). Dorcas/Tabitha is important to the early ministry of the church and when she dies, the other disciples send for Peter to come to her. Dorcas/Tabitha becomes not only a witness through her discipleship but through her own death and resurrection she tells the story of Jesus the Christ and witnesses to all of Joppa, and many believe because of what happens to her.

Psalm 23 is the familiar song of hope and strength in times of darkness and doubt, death and fear. We know that God provides for us and gives us strength and refuge in times of trouble. We know that with God, we are not alone, and even in death we have nothing to be afraid of, for God is right beside us. God will be with us throughout our lives. We recite this psalm at funerals and in times when we need reminders the most that we are not alone, even if we feel alone, we know that surely goodness and mercy will cover us. We know that we will dwell with God forever, even if we can’t feel it now.

In John 10:22-30, Jesus refers to those who know him as his sheep (at the beginning of chapter 10 he refers to himself as the Good Shepherd). The sheep know the voice of the shepherd. Those that follow God follow the Shepherd, for God and the Shepherd are one (vs. 30). When Jesus is questioned by the religious leaders, he replies quite frankly that he has told them and they don’t believe. Those that believe follow him and know his voice. The sheep trust the shepherd. We who follow Jesus trust Jesus. We trust his voice, and we believe because we trust. It’s less a question of doubts verses faith as it is a question of trust verses mistrust. We may have doubts and questions about faith, but if we trust in Jesus, we still have faith. It is when we do not trust that we have lost.

Revelation 7:9-17 shares the heavenly vision of John that God’s kingdom (community, commonwealth or kin-dom) includes all people—all nations and languages. God’s reign includes the wondrous diversity of humanity that is created in God’s image. John is told by the angel that these are the ones who have come out of the ordeal—the ones who strive through to the end, the ones who remain faithful, come from all nations and tribes, all languages. The community of faith in God encompasses the whole world, and in the reign of God, worship is central, and fear, pain, hunger and tears will be no more. There will be rejoicing and singing forevermore.

Our Good Shepherd guides us through the heights and depths of life, even during the most difficult times when we feel we are alone and abandoned, even when we feel the absence of God. Jesus speaks about trust, in knowing his voice. We may have doubts and questions, but we are called to trust. Trust leads to faith, and what Jesus calls us to do is to know his voice. This is the voice we trust in life and in death, through the valley of darkness and the shadow, when it seems there is no hope, we know Jesus’ voice. We trust the words of Jesus, who leads us into new life, everlasting life, that begins now.

Call to Worship (from Revelation 7:9-12)

We come from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, saying

 **Salvation belongs to our God, and to the Lamb!**

All of the angels gather round the people to worship God, singing

 **Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving,**

 **Honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever!**

We gather in this time of worship, remembering our heavenly calling,

 **To worship God and the Lamb, forever and ever! Amen!**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Holy God, we come to You confessing that we do not listen well. We make rash decisions and do not seek discernment in prayer. We place our hope in news and stock reports rather than in You. Forgive us for not listening to You, for not following Your example in Scripture. Call us away from the ways of the world and back into Your ways of love, justice and mercy. In the name of the Christ, the Good Shepherd who calls us by name, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon

John tells us in the book of Revelation that God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. We know that while we grieve now, we will rejoice again. We know that while we may be in darkness now, we will find the light again. When we struggle, we must follow the voice, the example of Jesus, knowing that when we remain faithful, God remains faithful to us. We are forgiven, we are loved, and we are sent forth. Amen.

Prayer

Gentle Shepherd, lead us to the green pastures and cool waters in times of stress and worry. Lead us to a full table when we feel empty and hollow inside. Lead us to the fullness of the cup of life when we feel drained by the world. Most of all, when the darkness of death lingers as a deep valley with no way out, show us the way out by Your light. Call us by name when we go astray so we might remember Your voice. Guide us in all the ways of our life, all of our days. In Your name, Jesus the Christ, the Lamb and the Good Shepherd, we pray. Amen.