



SAINT JAMES'
EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Fremont, California

SERMON

3. May, 2009. Easter 4

Title: "Follow Me; I Know The Back Way In"

Text: St. John 20:19-31

J.J.



Christ, The Good Shepherd

Traditionally, this Sunday is known as "Good Shepherd Sunday," because every year, some portion of the tenth chapter of St. John is read . . . that incredible chapter in which Jesus talks about himself as the Good Shepherd, and we his sheep . . . sheep who hear his voice and follow him. For many of us, it's a favorite Scripture story. However, there's one part of the story that for a long time had always puzzled me, and that's when Jesus says: "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice"—that passage had always puzzled me somewhat, until I met Larry, and then it all fell into place.

Larry was our neighbor when we lived in Alameda. Larry is a real person, and I have his permission to tell this story and to use his name. Larry lived across the street from us. Now, the best way to describe Larry is that he was/is one step above a street person, living day to day, and from odd job to odd job. Larry is a person who learned from the hard knocks of life . . . and what he learned was to live for "present." His "past" was really quite rough: he was brought to California by

his mother when he was twelve years old and abandoned by her at the doorstep of his father (whom he never met). It didn't take long for Larry to discover that he was not welcomed there either, nor was he wanted . . . and so, he ran away to make his living on the streets. As a teenager, he had few positive experiences . . . and saw little hope for the "future" He quickly learned to live for the present and to make the most of it. Over the years, as we got to know Larry better, we would hire him from time to time to help us work on our 128 year old Victorian . . . which needed lots of care and attention. And, I must say, over those years, Larry taught us a lot, not just about caring for the old Victorian, but about life.

Several years ago, just before Easter, Larry was doing some remodeling work for us, and in the midst of his patching and painting—(laughing) Larry would often get more paint on himself and his clothes than he did on the walls—in the midst of the paint job, I asked him: "Larry, how would you like to go with us to the Easter Vigil at Grace Cathedral next week?—it's one of the greatest services of the year." But before I could get another word out of my mouth, Larry replied: "Oh, no thanks, I don't do that *"stuff"* anymore" (actually, Larry used another word . . . 4-letter word that also begins with "S") . . . "I don't do that *"stuff"* anymore" . . . and so, I dropped the subject. Well, it was a day or two later, Larry said to me: "Ya know, I've been thinking about your offer . . ." Now, I had forgotten all about it, and so I asked: "What offer, Larry?" "Oh, you know, about going to the Easter service at the Cathedral . . . after all . . . it is Easter, and, ah . . . I probably should go. Were you guys serious about taking me with you?" . . . and together, Jonathan and I said: "Absolutely!" . . . "Well," said Larry, "The problem is I just have these jeans to wear . . . is that OK? And we said: "Don't worry about that, Larry . . . almost anything goes at the Cathedral . . . you can come as you are." Well, we knew that Larry only had some really worn out jeans . . . and a leather jacket that was spattered with white paint . . . and so, we went out and bought him a new pair of jeans and a dress shirt. When Larry arrived that night for us to take him to the Vigil, he was all "dressed up" in his new clothes, and (laughing) . . . he had carefully spray painted his leather jacket so it would all be black. It was absolutely amazing!

Arriving at the Cathedral, the three of us climbed the steps and were met outside by one of the priests who we know well. He quickly sized up the situation, and what we were up to—he knows us well—and he came over to greet and to welcome Larry . . . and, as if on a script, said to Larry: "You know this is one of the greatest services of the year . . . but it's a long service . . . and so, it's OK to if you take a break in the middle of it all . . . we all do . . . (and with a chuckle, he added) just come back . . . welcome to Grace Cathedral" . . . and the three of us took our places in the darkened church.

Well, it was about in the middle of the second reading, Larry leaned over to me and asked: "Is there a bathroom here?" . . . and I whispered back: "Yes, downstairs" and pointed to the steps. Larry got up and left . . .

and I said to myself: “that’s the last we’ll see of Larry tonight . . . it’s just a little too much for him.” Well, I couldn’t have been more mistaken. Several readings later, Larry came walking back in . . . and with him came three or four other people . . . strangers, who we had never seen before. They quietly walked in and took their seats a couple of rows behind us, and stayed for the rest of the service.

After the service, as we were driving back to Alameda, I asked Larry who those people were . . . and Larry said: “Oh, yah . . . well . . . I found the men’s room just like you said . . . and since Father said it was OK for me to take a break in the service, I decided to go have a smoke . . . I made my way through that dark maze of hallways downstairs to a door that led me outside. The door was locked, so I propped it open . . . so I could bet back in, after all, Father said I had to come back. Well, I had my smoke. And standing near by was this group of people. They asked me what was going on at the Cathedral tonight: it’s all dark, but there seem to be a lot of people there. And I said: “Oh . . . tonight is the Easter Vigil, the greatest service of the year . . . you should come in?” And they said: “Oh no, we couldn’t do that . . . it’s already started and we don’t want to disturb anyone.” And Larry said: “Oh, that’s OK. **Follow me. I know the back way in**” And they followed him . . . and joined us in the celebration of Easter, the greatest service of the year.

I won’t forget that night. Larry taught me something very important about the “other sheep”—**“Follow me, I know the back way in”** And there’s an important message for all of us in this story, especially for us here at St. James’. I want to call to your attention a wonderful article in “The Window” this month by **Greg Scheuffele or Jim McConnell on being Greeters at St. James’. That’s a ministry we want to get going again, and soon. Greg and Jim provide us all with some helpful suggestion about welcoming those who are new, and assisting visitors to find their way through our sometimes complicated worship services, and helping people to become better acquainted with one another, and inviting our guests to go with us to the coffee hour, and introducing them to the other members of our Parish, in other words, to welcome the stranger. And Greg and Jim have invited us to volunteer for this important ministry. Well . . . I’m going to up the ante. Greg and Jim, and Kathy and I are going to tap some of you on the shoulder and “call” you to this important ministry. Of course, you can volunteer, and we would delight in that . . . but, I also remember, the disciples did not volunteer . . . they were called. And, Larry, did not ask for volunteers to come to the Easter Vigil . . . he simply called out to the strangers: “Follow me. I know the back way in.” Indeed! . . . “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.” Amen.**

S.D.G.

The Rev. Dr. David E. Abernethy-Deppe
Castro Valley, California