

Fourth Sunday in Easter
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
Vicar Sarah Derrick
May 12, 2019

It has been a joy to be your vicar this year. I have so appreciated you welcoming me into this place and sharing your life with me as I have moved through my final year of seminary. I have been blessed by your stories, your passion, and your faithful wondering together about how God is calling you to be a part of God's mission in the world.

I think it might be helpful for me to share a bit about what comes next, or at least what I know at this point, not only so that you have an update on me, but also so that you know more about how our larger denomination works. In the Lutheran church, candidates (people like me who are finishing seminary and are now eligible to be ordained as pastors) get assigned by the bishops of all 65 synods of the ELCA to serve their first call in synods across the US. I have been assigned to the North Texas/North Louisiana Synod and have been in conversation with the bishop and a congregation about where I might be following graduation.

It was on the plane ride home from an interview in this synod a couple weeks ago that I did what I love to do when I happen to be on a plane that has a TV at each seat: I perused the documentaries. One in particular caught my eye. We've known each other for about a year now, so I would imagine you won't be too surprised when I tell you what it's about. The film is titled *Soufra* (it is available on Hulu) and it follows a woman named Mariam, a Palestinian refugee living in a refugee camp in Lebanon. Mariam works to open a catering company, gathering women from the refugee

community to be a part of this new business. (Big themes for Vicar Sarah: food and interfaith... right?)

Mariam bumps up against government rules and regulations that stall her work to expand her business as she works to get a food truck, a step that would expand the company outside the boundaries of the refugee camp. She persists, and in her persistence, she leads the women who have joined her in this work toward a life with meaningful work, toward hope when hope for many seemed so far off.

We have three rich readings today, and in each of them, there are pictures of hope in the midst of despair.

In Acts, we have the story of Dorcas, or Tabitha. She is the only woman named as a disciple (the only feminine conjugation of the word disciple in the New Testament), and she has spent her life among the vulnerable, among the widows of her community in solidarity and service. In the wake of her death, Peter, one of the apostles whom Jesus sent out to do work in his name, is called in.

There is despair in the new absence of this beloved leader. Hope that just maybe Peter might be able to perform a miracle.

The despair that drove a community to seek out Peter, to bring him to where Dorcas laid dead. Hope in the call from Peter that Dorcas has been raised from the dead—hope for what this means next.

In Revelation we have a picture of a gathered people from every nation, every language—together, a picture of God's peaceful reign. Singing together, the

community has a special attention to a particular group of people, the ones clothed in white. Then, it is shared who these particular people are.

These are the ones who had known hunger, thirst, scorching heat, ones who had known oppression, who had suffered.

These are the ones who together are met with hope in the presence of God, guiding them to springs of new life, wiping the tears of despair from their eyes. Hope that the life they have known is not the life that waits ahead.

And finally in John, we have Jesus, being questioned by the religious authorities... something we remember hearing not too long ago through Holy Week. Jesus is asked, once again, who he is. Jesus names the unbelief of these leaders. These religious authorities, they are the ones using religion to exploit others and elevate themselves. But Jesus's response is a testament to who God is and what God's reign is doing. Jesus promises that while those in power neglect the vulnerable, that as a good shepherd, God's love gathers and cares for the vulnerable.

Those who have known suffering know the sound of hope. They know the sound of good news. This is the promise of Jesus in John, to gather in those who have been isolated, forgotten, neglected into a beloved community.

Both in Revelation and in John, Jesus, or the shepherd, meets the sheep in their despair. That's what we celebrate in the incarnation. God enters into human flesh, into a fully human life, so that God can feel fully what those places of despair that we inhabit are like.

God fully feels the despair of refugee families. God fully feels the despair of losing a beloved friend. God fully feels the disparaging effects of racism and xenophobia on our communities and in our world. God fully feels the reality of death, of abandonment by those whom you had hoped would abide with you. God fully feels.

Which makes the unique words of new life spoken in each of these passages, but especially in Acts by the apostle Peter to a lifeless Dorcas all the more powerful. “Tabitha, Get up.”

Get up. Not because your grief doesn’t matter, but because it matters so much to God that the despair of this world can’t and won’t be the end. Get up. Get up because God is a God of resurrection, who continues to bring life out of places where hope seemed improbable, even impossible.

Get up. And if you can’t get up today, take heart from our scripture.

It was Dorcas’s community brought her back to life. The ones clothed in white were a community, made up of ones who shared an experience of suffering. The sheep don’t come alone but are gathered out of isolation into community, and led by the shepherd. Get up.

Get up is the message of hope proclaimed to us; it is the message of resurrection that we are *still* celebrating this Easter season.

Like Mariam and the women who have been gathered to work with *Soufra*, God gathers us to witness new life, to witness hope when it seemed impossible.

There's one more little nugget I'll share with you all that I learned in this documentary. Soufra is the name of the catering business and the food truck that Mariam and her team run. Mariam says that they picked the name Soufra because in Arabic it means a big table filled with delicious food. Now, we didn't include Psalm 23 in our service today, but it is a part of this week's lectionary readings—Good Shepherd Sunday isn't complete without a little Psalm 23. While we didn't sing it together this week, I want to just read one verse, feel free to say it along with me if you know it.

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.”(Psalm 23:5)

This is the power of hope in the resurrection. This is the strength of God our shepherd. That even in the midst of our enemies, in the midst of despair, a big table filled with delicious food is prepared and shared.

We find that hope in God's grace each week at this table, this Soufra, a table that is filled with good food that empowers us to get up, to act. It is only by God's grace that we are witnesses to the hope of Dorcas's community- the hope of the ones robbed in white, the hope of the sheep gathered by the shepherd.

It is by God's grace that we are gathered into community, guided by the good shepherd, given the gift of hope, too.

Can you see it? Can you taste it?

Now, get up, and bear witness to the power of God's relentless hope.