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Episcopal Church

St. John's

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Easter IV

THE FISH, THE SHEPHERD, THE EARTH

Several weeks ago our son, Jesse, spotted a Great Blue Heron flying near our small pond, and I went into full battle alert. I used to love these magnificent birds before they began liberally consuming the koi and gold fish in *my* pond. I still greatly admire them, but in other locations. I have notes on my calendar reminding me to put heavy deer netting over the pond in May but this heron was early. I surmise that it is the same bird that came last year. Perhaps he is building a family somewhere and comes to our place for convenient food shopping.

There are lots of fish in the pond, so I could probably spare a few, but this bird has the nerve to go after the biggest ones...

So ... the netting is now loosely sprawled over the pond. It keeps the deer away from the lilies as well as protecting the fish. About a week ago, I noticed a colorful little fish very still in the water with its tail fin pointing toward the bank. When I came back later in the day, she (I guessed) was still there, probably laying eggs. "How sweet", I thought. Two days later she was still there! That's a lot of eggs! Curious, I looked closer, and saw that she was actually stuck in the net that I had put there to protect her. She could not get free on her own, so I helped her. I was relieved to see her swim away, a little dazed but alive.

Unintended consequences! It's ironic when efforts to protect what we love have the reverse effect.

Even with the fish, it is not always clear when to protect them and when to let nature take its course. The desire to protect the things we own, the ideas we cherish, and those we love is natural, though not always constructive. Yesterday, our class of Confirmands participated in a Ropes Course, led by Steve Wertz. One parent I met earlier in the week had the understandable concern about the possibility of physical harm coming to her son. I tried to reassure her that her son would be very safe. There is no question that a toddler requires constant vigilance and protection. Over the years, however, the challenge for most parents is to let go of sheltering their offspring and give them freedom and trust instead. There is no growth without risk, and there are no guarantees of safety in this life.

The cover of today's bulletin shows Jesus saving a lost sheep, which wandered off to the edge of a steep cliff. Jesus leaves behind the other 99 sheep to rescue this lamb. He is stuck in thorns and buzzards can be seen flying overhead, anticipating a meal. Jesus reaches over the precipice to save this poor creature. The import is that Jesus is our shepherd, we shall not want. He loves us and will not abandon us who are his sheep. He will risk his own life even to protect or save ours.

The statue of the good shepherd carrying the lost lamb, which normally resides in the back of the church, tenderly depicts this "wondrous love". The shepherd loves us even when we stray, even when our brokenness and weakness have the upper hand in our lives, perhaps especially in those times. In today's Gospel, Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand." Jesus' fierce love is not about guaranteeing

physical safety or longevity. It is, rather, about God's constant yearning for our spiritual wholeness.

Last Thursday was the 40th anniversary of Earth Day. We are re-discovering that our spiritual and physical health are deeply interconnected with the health of the planet. The earth is a great gift. God's spirit moves through the deep ocean currents just as it flows through Riga Brook and through the blood in our veins. The heart's pulse echoes the pulse of the earth. It is our nature to protect, even aggressively defend, things of lesser value: our possessions, a comfortable life-style, our status and our money. But in the last few decades, things have changed radically. The survival of the earth itself is now up for grabs. And something new is required of us.

Let's imagine that instead of rescuing one sheep, the shepherd extends his reach to save the earth and all that is in it before it falls into an abyss. It is not because he is afraid that he goes after the lost sheep. He is fearless. He loves the sheep as much as, or more than, his own life. Similarly, if we were to strive to save this beautiful and fragile planetary island in space, we would do so not out of fear but out of deep love and respect. We are connected and we are one with God and creation. In a real sense, saving the creation is saving God.

Scientists recently started up the Large Hadron Collider built in a 17-mile loop on the French-Swiss border. Its purpose is to facilitate the head-on collision of the tiniest known particles at the highest of speeds, thereby releasing incredible amounts of energy. One reporter writes, "If the Collider performs as expected, it could nail down the holy grail of contemporary physics, the Higgs boson --- known as the 'God particle'. This "God particle" has yet to be actually observed, but is believed to infuse the universe (like God).

Once actually discovered and observed, physicists expect that the “God particle” will yield information about the “Big Bang” and “dark matter” which makes up 85% of the universe. It may also shed light on the as-yet-unexplainable movement of galaxies.

This is what we are connected to. This is what we are part of. Science and mysticism merge, mercy and truth kiss. We are one.

We began with a story about a little fish and end with the song of whales. I invite you now to listen to a remarkable recording that traces ever so gently the invisible lines that connect us with God particles and all of our earth. In this song called “Lullaby”, Paul Winter weaves the hauntingly beautiful calls of a mother whale and her baby into the fabric of the music. So relax; close your eyes if you want, or meditate, feel the rhythm of your own breathing in the music. Since it is a lullaby it is just fine if you fall asleep.

Praise God; praise the earth and all that dwells on and in it.
Praise life.