

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

May 8, 2022 – EASTER 4, YR. C

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Spring Cleaning ... Our Souls*”*

Acts 9:36-43 (Tabitha is raised from the dead, through Peter’s prayers)
Psalm 23 (The Lord is our shepherd, we shall not want)
Revelation 7:9-17 (Praise and glory to God in heavenly worship)
St. John 10:22-30 (Jesus is the Good Shepherd; His sheep hear His voice)

“It was winter,” St. John tells us. What’s the worst winter you’ve ever experienced? Remember what it was like? Stark trees and unrelenting, gray, dead skies. Seemingly endless snow. Bitter cold draining the life out of everyone and everything. Stinging wind that watered your eyes and tore at your skin. The dulling numbness, as fingers and toes lost their feeling. The brutal crunch of hard-frozen ground. And the overlong darkness, day after day.

Those of us who live in the northeast have all experienced winters like that. But St. John is not giving us a weather report or simply describing a time of year. Rather, he is pointing to a season of faith. That “it was winter” is not a comment on the climate in ancient Jerusalem. It’s a diagnosis of the interior condition, the cold, stripped-bare faith, of those who have gathered for the Feast of Dedication—what we know as the Jewish observance of Hanukkah.¹

This feast celebrated the liberation of Jerusalem and the Temple from the Syrian King Antiochus Epiphanes. In 167 BC, this pagan monarch had desecrated the Temple by erecting within it an altar to the god Zeus, and sacrificing *pigs* on the altar. Two years later, a Jewish revolt led by the Maccabees liberated the city and regained control of the Temple, re-consecrating it to the one true God, the God of Israel.²

As Jesus walks in the Temple, He does so with His fellow Jews who have gathered year-after-year to remember and celebrate the day it was re-consecrated to God. The problem is, these men and women have failed to consecrate themselves to God, to give themselves to Him in faith and service. Instead, they stand frozen in the past. Their icy, hardened hearts cannot hear Jesus’ words, understand His works, or recognize who He is.

As a result, they miss the gift of eternal life that God has been offering them—as demonstrated in the changing of water into wine; the feeding of the 5,000; the healing of the lame and the sick; the raising of Lazarus; and in the commandment to love God and each other.

However, this is not simply a problem of some ancient Jews. It’s your problem and mine, too, because it is the problem of humans in relationship with God. Too often, we consecrate, we set apart, we dedicate, the exterior temples of our lives to God, while keeping our hearts to ourselves.

We go through the outward motions of being sincere, righteous Christians. But inwardly, we are a mess of selfish contradictions, conflicted feelings, erroneous beliefs that are too influenced by the world, and overtly non-Christian thoughts and intentions.

So what’s our problem? Let’s face it. Sometimes it’s just easier, safer, and more comfortable to dedicate to God the externals of our lives, rather than risk consecrating our hearts—our interior temples—to Him. Because to re-consecrate our interior temples would require new management. It would necessitate a change in how we see, hear, know, believe, and live. It might be uncomfortable, to say the least.

However, as long as we fail to consecrate to God our lives and hearts, and all that we are, and all that we have, we will remain like those people in the Temple who did not accept Jesus and the new and everlasting life He offers. We will be unable to hear and obey the voice of Jesus, our Good Shepherd. As a result, we will not know how to follow Him into eternal life.

During this season of Eastertide, the Scriptures speak to us of eternal life, but what does that really mean? Unlike ancient pagans and postmodernist New-Agers, Christians do not believe in immortality as some inherent capacity to live forever in a timeless state with no particular content.

The eternal life that God gives to all who receive and believe in Jesus Christ is not merely a state of extended existence. Rather, it is the continuation of a loving relationship. Simply put, it is unending friendship with God—both here on earth, and beyond the grave.

For those of you who worry about what will happen to you after you die, the Bible tells us over and over precisely what Jesus says in today’s Gospel: To all who believe in, and follow Christ, He will give “eternal life,” we will “never perish,” and “no one can snatch us” out of His hand. First Corinthians 6:19 tells us that our “bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit,” reminding us that God gives His own Spirit to all who believe. So how could He possibly abandon us?

In other words, whether we live or die, we are in God’s hands, and *no one*—not the devil, not even our own sins—can snatch us out of His hands. That is why, when Jesus died on the Cross, He said to God the Father, “into Thy hands I commend my spirit.” We cannot perceive or fully comprehend what life after life, or heaven, may be like. And other than in the book of Revelation, the Bible doesn’t have a lot to say about such things. However, Scripture does assure us that Jesus will never cast a believer out from His presence, and He will never release us from His loving embrace. He’s got our back, and we are in His hands. And that is all that matters!

With the ears of faith we *can* hear His voice. And with the eyes of faith, we who are the sheep of His pasture *can* see the way to follow our Good Shepherd. Unlike those people in the Temple, we won’t have to ask Jesus, “Tell us plainly who You are.” For us to do so would reveal that we have become entirely too at-ease in our faith, too comfortable with consecrating only our exterior temples.

Spring is *supposed* to be here. It’s that time of year when our attention turns to sprucing up our yards and homes, cleaning out all the dead stuff and planting what will produce new growth. It’s also the perfect season to do a spring cleaning of our hearts, and some new planting in our lives.

For your lawn, you can read seed catalogues and brochures about trees, shrubs, and flowers. For your soul, go read the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3–12—and *take them to heart*: Blessed are the poor, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.

Listen to Jesus’ teachings: love God, your neighbor, yourself, and your enemy; do not worry about your life or tomorrow; turn the other cheek; do not judge; sell your possessions and give to the poor; take up your cross; show mercy like the Good Samaritan; forgive seventy times seven; wash each other’s feet; follow Me.

If that doesn’t cause us to squirm just a bit and feel somewhat uneasy, enough to honestly reexamine our lives and priorities, then perhaps the winter of our faith is still here. Personally, yard work and spring cleaning make me squirm. But humbly reevaluating my life before God, and the vulnerability this entails, can get me even more agitated.

Yet, the uncomfortable faith to which Jesus calls us leads to nothing less than God’s own life, eternal life, right here, right now, in this world, in your life and in mine, *and* in the life to come. It is a supreme quality of life that never perishes, and it makes us the “un-snatchable” people of God, because life everlasting is unending fellowship with the God of all Creation, who loves us more than we can ask or imagine.

The new and eternal life Christ offers us means that every day of the year we are an Easter People, and our song is *always* “Alleluia!”—even at the grave, and to ages and ages unending.

To God be all honor, praise, and glory, now and forever. Amen!

* Adapt. N. George-Hacker, 21 April 2013, St. Christopher’s Episcopal Church, Cobleskill, NY. Used with Permission.

¹ Adapt. Michael K. Marsh, “Uncomfortable Faith, Unsnatchable People,” interruptingthesilence.com <<http://interruptingthesilence.com/2010/04/25/uncomfortable-faith-unsatchable-people-a-sermon-for-easter-4c/>> 20 April 2013.

² “Hanukkah,” [Wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hanukkah), 11 April 2022 <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hanukkah>> 29 April 2022.