

`Sermon, May 3, 2020

Good morning. Welcome once again to stay-at-home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, Maryland. I am Pastor Scott Robinson and joining us this morning for music will be our friends Mike Broderick and Alice Fleischman, from the popular local musical group Aurora Celtic. Mike is also our organist at St. Mark's, and both of these folks can play more instruments than I can name.

Thanks to all who have kept up with, and in some cases even stepped up your giving to help keep your church afloat in these difficult times. Meanwhile many of our kids have been joining us for Virtual Sunday School on Sunday mornings, hosted by Nicole, Ashley and Taylor. That's been great fun, and a wonderful opportunity for our kids and their parents not only to learn, but to visit with each other. If your children or grandchildren or even your neighbor's kids want to join in, just call the Church office and we will add them to the list.

As for how much longer we will be worshiping this way, who knows? As long as it takes, I guess. Glad you could join us today. If you get something out of our service today, please like and maybe even share it if you got here through our Facebook page. Comments are also welcome.

The Lord be with you. Let us pray. O God our shepherd, you know your sheep by name and lead us to safety through the valleys of death. Guide us by your voice, that we may walk in certainty and security to the joyous feast prepared in your house, through Jesus Christ, our savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to John, the tenth chapter.

[Jesus said] "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.

They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate.

Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. I am the Good Shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Let us pray. God of wisdom may your word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

Sorry--I should have warned you. If you were reading the gospel along with me today, you'll note that I added one more verse at the end. It reads, "I Am The Good Shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." And I added that for a reason.

Today is the fourth Sunday of Easter, which is also known as Good Shepherd Sunday. We always read from the tenth chapter of John on this day. In most Bibles it is headlined something like "Jesus, the Good

Shepherd.” Problem is the prescribed reading for this year ends just before Jesus had a chance to call himself that.

Some find these first verses of John 10 to be a bit awkward.

When Jesus started out describing himself as the shepherd, his audience didn’t seem to get it. So he switched his metaphor midstream, calling himself instead “the gate.”

And when they didn’t seem to get that either, he went back to being the “shepherd.” Personally, I’m glad. Our hymns on a normal Good Shepherd Sunday usually have a shepherding theme. So do a couple of the other readings, the prayers and when things were all normal, the choir and handbell anthems. Not sure what we would sing if this was “gate” Sunday instead of Shepherd Sunday. “Gate is thy faithfulness?” “How Gate Thou Art?”

Once he went back to it, Jesus stuck with the shepherd metaphor for the rest of his shepherd sermon, which, frankly, got mixed reviews. Sure--some folks got it. But others thought Jesus was either out of his mind or perhaps had a demon. I can relate. That’s the same way my sermons are sometimes received too.

Speaking of me, for the last fifty years or so Good Shepherd Sunday has also been observed as “Vocations” Sunday. That’s a day set aside for the church to honor and celebrate those folks who have chosen careers in ministry. They picked Good Shepherd Sunday to do so, probably because the word “pastor” is actually the Latin word for “shepherd.”

All year long I look forward to Vocations Sunday—the one day set aside in the Church Calendar for me to say, “hip hip—hooray--for me!” Although truthfully, I don’t really think Lutherans should make a big deal about pastors. Luther didn’t think so either. But that’s another sermon.

I read a couple of pastors' blogs about the gospel text this week. Some advised, "It's awkward. Preach on a different reading."

Last time around I think I DID default to the fail-safe 23rd Psalm—the shepherd psalm, that is arguably the best-known and most beloved of all Bible passages. It is also among today's suggested readings. And I probably mentioned that the thing I most like about the 23rd Psalm is that the author acknowledges life isn't always just a matter of overflowing cups, green pastures and still waters.

Like it or not, there are also enemies out there—sometimes human, sometimes natural disasters and sometimes viruses and other infectious diseases. That psalm in particular helps us to negotiate the valleys of the shadow of death that imperil us all too frequently in this life. Reminding us that we would be lost without the guidance of God, and the mutual support and companionship of each other.

Some commentaries I read this week think the Gospel reading is a confusing speech, that maybe the author of John didn't think through very well. First off—is Jesus the shepherd or the gate? I didn't see how he could be both. But then I realized maybe I really didn't know enough about first century Near East shepherding to have an informed opinion. And maybe you don't either. Let's fix that.

Even though in Jesus' day shepherds were considered among the lowest class of citizens—just a step above beggars-- Near Easterners had a longstanding appreciation of the role a shepherd plays in the lives of the sheep in his or her charge. Shepherds keep sheep fed and watered. They provide medicine when sheep are sick and first aid when they are hurt. When the flocks are led from field to field to graze, shepherds dedicate themselves to keeping them on the right path.

Getting sheep to water certainly carries its own risks. Water has always been hard to find in the Holy Land. And while sheep CAN swim, they aren't very good at it, especially younger ones.

So it is up to the shepherd to keep the sheep from getting caught up in swift currents or from getting in over their heads.

Charged with keeping the flock safe and sound, watered and fed, it's no wonder that deities, kings and religious leaders were often referred to as shepherds of the people throughout the Near East. To the Israelites, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and David were all shepherds of both flocks and people.

And God is understood as the overarching shepherd of the Old Testament, much like Jesus is the shepherd of the New. So what about the gate?

Turns out the typical Palestinian town or village normally included a common sheepfold, called a g'DAY-rah in Old Testament Hebrew, or a ulhn twn probaton-- "pen of the sheep"-- in New Testament Greek. The gedayrah was an unroofed, walled and gated enclosure shared by the town's shepherds.

It's where their sheep would be protected from their various natural predators, like wolves and jackals; and water and grasses were amply supplied.

Grazing the flock in the fields or wilderness was another matter. Shepherds would stack stones to form small protective enclosures for the sheep at night. But you know-- there isn't much wood to be found in the Palestinian wilderness for building qur ai --meaning doorways or gates. So a small opening was normally left in the stone walls to allow ingress and egress to and from the a ulhn twn probaton-- the, "Pen of the sheep."

At night the shepherd himself would typically lie down to block-off the opening and sleep there. In other words, the shepherd would become the gate. Essentially risking his own body and putting his own life on the line in order to defend and protect his sheep.

The Gospel of John's first readers certainly would have known that. And they knew that Jesus, their shepherd, had done exactly that. Offered up his own body. Put his own life on the line. To protect and save them.

So now this awkward reading from John, chapter ten doesn't really seem so awkward. But I wonder if it might have a different message for us today, as well. John's first readers saw themselves as a flock. They were part of a tightly-knit persecuted community that huddled together for protection from their own wolves and jackals, under the watchful eye of their guardian shepherd. Who yes, would also step-up when needed, as their gate.

But this certainly isn't our situation as a Church in 21st century America. We are also a flock of sorts, but one without natural predators. Still these days we are locked-down. Led by our shepherd and guarded by our gate. But in the first few verses of today's reading I noticed that the shepherd doesn't so much see his main purpose as leading the flock IN to the sheepfold. His job instead is primarily to lead them OUT of it.

Out into the real world, where today his flock is especially needed. Of course we aren't going anywhere anytime soon in our current situation. Maybe to get food and health care and essential needs, but otherwise we're hunkered down, while protected, safe and sound in our own G'dayrahs. Hopefully soon enough our lives will get back to normal.

And we'll be free to do what we can for all those folks out there who are hurting. Many are out of work. Millions are hungry.

Some have lost loved ones to the virus, and some have lost loved ones to other causes, but were unable to grieve or properly commemorate those who they lost because of limits on gathered groups and social distancing.

One day we will again count on our Good Shepherd to lead us back out into the sometimes-scary real world that so desperately needs us. And

he will count on us. To share the gospel—the Good News that in Christ, God is with us, even in the scary here and now.

Calling us to follow and do our part of the shepherd's work. Feeding a world that is hungry. Caring for its sick and other-abled. Trying to keep our young folks on the right path.

Finding and protecting safe water supplies so the world won't thirst. Keeping fellow human beings from getting caught up in the swift currents, or getting in over their heads. Leading others to still waters and green pastures, but also helping them through the bumps in the road and shadowy valleys.

Why would he want US do that sort of thing? As he put it, "I came that ALL people may have life, and have it abundantly." You see, he's the shepherd. The Good Shepherd. The one who laid down his own life for his sheep.

Amen.