

Sunday, May 3, 2020

Psalm 23 and John 10:1-18

“Jesus, the Good Shepherd”

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! We rejoice on this fourth Sunday of Easter because we are Christians and we need to lift up our hearts and minds to praising God for the gift of Jesus that God has given to us all. Spring in all its beauty is around us with birds singing their morning songs, sunshine and rain taking turns drying and wetting the ground and the smell of fresh cut grass abounds! We have been staying home and safe for over six weeks and we know that by our doing this we have been able to reduce the number of expected COVID19 cases and deaths. The statistics are changing each day and as our Canadian and regional medical directors of health have stated, there is hope and a glimpse in sight when this virus will be identified, known, recognized for what it is. This is important because as people have recovered from the illness caused by the virus they have spoken about where they have been and the symptoms as they started and what caused them alarm to seek medical help. Others have noted the same ideas from where they had travelled, to the symptoms of the virus upon their bodies and how they responded. This is good for in our scientific focused world, when there is agreement upon information further steps may be put forward to discover what is happening.

We who are told to stay at home might feel antsy to get out- to do something rather than watch tv, or even attend another zoom meeting. We might be feeling the stress and the need to have time alone, to wander off for a bit but we must remain steadfast to realize that if we were to resume our daily activities now, a resurgence might occur and this too would not be helpful at all. We might even worry and wonder and question God about why, how and what is going to happen today, tomorrow and next week. And God will respond- trust me and follow and all will be well. Follow me. We have hope because we who have faith believe in God and our hope is found in Jesus who shows us new possibilities of what may be and can be through him and because of His death and resurrection!

A little while ago I was shopping at the grocery store as part of my Friday morning routine. I had my winter coat and toque on as it was cold outside. After getting my shopping cart I proceeded into the store and started to pick up my different fresh vegetables. I looked over the counters and there was a lady from my church family picking up bananas. I said hi to her and she looked at me funny and turned away. I then walked around the counter a bit and looked at the lady again but this time I called her by name and asked how are you doing this morning.

This time this woman looked me straight in the eye and said, "I'm sorry I don't know you." When she said this I wondered again and I looked to see if was the lady I really knew her- sure it was and I knew I had called her by the correct name. Then I looked at myself and thought- my glasses had turned dark because of the sun and then had fogged up, my toque was down over my forehead and over my ears so that no hair showed at all. Then I said, "Hi again and said, I'm Rev Cathy from Glenwood Church." This poor lady was so embarrassed that she did not recognize me. I told her it was OK you don't usually see me with a toque and winter coat on. She said no, you are usually in your robe and stole! I then said it was all right.. but I'm glad it was really you who I did know otherwise people would have looked at me funny too! We laughed together because we knew each other and what connected us is Jesus and his church.

This story reminds me of the relationship between those in ministry and the people of the congregation. And right now I am missing you all very much. But know this, I am also aware that you are missing each other too! Being separated from each other is not what we like to do in the church because it is the relationships that we have with each other through the Spirit of God that enables us to care and share with each other all of life's celebrations. We all are looking forward to the time when we are given the green light to worship in our sanctuary again; we will be celebrating being the church together and truly praising God!

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday with our scriptural focus on how God and His Son Jesus take on the image and role as Shepherd to those who will follow in faith and live according to his teachings. We often think that when Jesus taught those in the synagogue about who he was and he said, "I am the good shepherd," that this was the first time this image was used to build up the relationship between Jesus and his followers. But if we turn to the Old Testament in the book of Numbers 27:17, God speaks to Moses prior to their going into the Promised land. God tells Moses that he cannot enter the land with the people because of his previous sins and so he is to appoint Joshua to this role. This is because it is important that the people of God may not be like sheep without a shepherd.

The prophet Ezekiel (34:14-16) also uses the image of God as the True Shepherd when he states, "I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and will bring them into their own land and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel. I will feed them with good pasture and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture, there they shall lie down in good grazing land and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep... I will seek the

lost and I will bring back the strayed and I will bind up the injured and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.” Again the image of sheep in need of someone to look after them, to ensure they are safe, have food and are content with their life as they understand it.

Many generations of people throughout the church learned Psalm 23 –the Psalm of the Shepherd for memory work maybe even at school. But it was when people looked closely at these words, the relationship between God and his faithful people was described and became comforting. For some individuals and organizations, it is the poetry of the King James Version that speaks to their hearts for it is in these words that they find familiar bring much comfort and even tradition. This Psalm has two major extended metaphors. The first is the analogy between the Lord God and a shepherd, a person who herds sheep. This metaphor continues in the lines which follow as the shepherd protects his flock with his rod and his staff. These were the tools of the shepherd: the rod would be used to protect the sheep from predators or reprimand unruly sheep that pick on others, eat the wrong plants, or are oblivious to danger. The shepherd would use the rod to part the sheep's wool to look for wounds, disease, and the overall condition of the skin. The staff would often have a curve at the top which would enable the shepherd to hook the sheep's neck if under duress or attack and be able to pick up the animal without harming it. The second is the image of death and the life after. There is nothing to fear because the shepherd does not abandon the sheep and life will be in His presence for all of eternity.

A shepherd was usually a younger male individual with a vested interest in the flock. Often a younger teenage boy would be given the task to oversee the sheep as they grazed during the day, then be brought home at night and put into a sheepfold. They were also on duty at night and served as the gate to the fold barring any animals going in or out. Sheep farmers were important as they not only provided fleece for wool and eventual clothing but also food. Shepherds could not sleep all day because sheep would wander away in search of better food or water. Often when they did this, natural predators would come and try to kill them. So, a good shepherd with family connections was important in order to keep the number of sheep stable and well and able to produce fleece for wool. The shepherds would also be with them from birth and as they grew older they would know the one who would look after them through their lives. They knew the shepherd by their voice and would follow.

Jesus was very much aware of the sheep farmer's and the role that shepherds played. So in John 10 when he states, “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...they know his voice and they follow him. They were the gatekeeper of the pen a place of safety for the sheep. This is just like Jesus who came so that we might have life and have it abundantly. This is Jesus who laid down His life for the sheep and rose to new life so that we might receive the gift of eternal life eternal in God's promised heavenly home. Jesus was

Jesus is our shepherd and he calls you by name to follow. In Peter's first letter (2:25) we read that the shepherd knows if you have strayed away. But he called to you and continues to call you so that when you return to the shepherd it will be like you never left. He will oversee your life. No matter what you do in your life and no matter where you go, the Shepherd will watch over your life. The image of Jesus/ God as the True or Good Shepherd brings healing because it helps each of us to remember that the Lord is always with us.

Currently we can't stray too far as we have been told to stay home and safe but there will come a time when we won't have to stay at home but we will choose to do what the Shepherd has called us to do maybe years ago and now again. We are called by name by the Shepherd the question is do you hear your name and are you following? We are the people of God's pasture and the sheep of His hand. There is no one like the Good Shepherd who knows us fully and still loves us. But the question we must answer in faith and with hope is are you his sheep? Do you live and love others in the name of the Shepherd, Jesus? Do you love others as you seek to know him? Are you growing in faith and knowledge of the Shepherd who can give us all joy in the midst of uncertainty, worry and in a worldwide pandemic? Christ Jesus, the Good Shepherd is calling you. Are you his sheep?

Let us pray:

God of grace and love we come before you because your spirit has touched our hearts in this moment. You are the good shepherd who leads us safely through danger and you calm our fears. Be with us and guide us always. We ask in the name of Jesus the Risen Christ. Amen.

SPECIAL MUSIC: we are going to play a special song right now called "Are you the Shepherd?" it is from More Voices126. And the lyrics are the following:

Are you a shepherd, good shepherd who leads us safely through danger, while calming our fears?

Are you a father who shelters and feeds us, shares in our laughter and wipes away tears?

Yes, you are shepherd, parent and teacher, but you are greater than all that we know.
Holy and living, loving and giving, God, you are with us wherever we go.

Are you a mother, good mother who bears us, comforts, protects us and helps us to rest?
Are you a teacher who daily prepares us, challenging students to offer their best?

Great, gentle shepherd, forever beside us, lead all your children in paths that are right.
Great, loving parent, wise teacher, you guide us.
We want to love you and bring you delight.