

Sermon May 3, 2020

Grace, Mercy and Peace, from God our father, and from Jesus Christ, Amen.

Welcome to worship with us, we hope that you are finding hope and encouragement in our services, and that you are being supplied by God with patience and fortitude to endure these dog days of social distancing and lockdown. Things are changing, there is a loosening up, people are becoming more agitated, more and more people are venturing out, and we see that government restrictions will have to loosen soon. For us in New Jersey, we don't know exactly when. But rest assured, here at Redeemer, we will try to be as ready as we can, and we will be communicating with you about how we will gather and what efforts we will make to ensure that we are safe in whatever that gathering looks like.

In the meantime, we deal with our experience as we live it, and today, on this Good Shepherd Sunday, we are trying to live into the blessedness of being part of Jesus' Flock. The Sundays after Easter always have themes. For example, the second Sunday after Easter is always Doubting Thomas Sunday. The fourth Sunday of Easter is always Good Shepherd Sunday, when the Gospel lesson deals with the image of Jesus as our shepherd, who leads us to safe pasture, who seeks us when we get lost, who rescues us, who protects us, and whose sheepfold, his kingdom, is our true home and refuge, which gives us rest and peace.

The Gospel lesson today provides wonderful imagery of Jesus' stalwart claim on us as his sheep. In the first five verses of this text, Jesus is the Good Shepherd who protects his flock, and they know his voice and follow him. Or again, in a slightly different image in verses 7-10, Jesus describes himself as the gate that we enter into the sheepfold. Those who enter by another way are fakes, imposters. This image of Jesus as the gate has an echo later in the Gospel, when Jesus tries to explain to his disciples that he must leave them; he says, "I am the way the truth and the life. No one comes to the father but by me." There is an exclusive claim here, that Jesus is how we all come to God. But we make a mistake to insist that this exclusive gate is opened only for those who WE feel are deserving. The fact is that if Jesus is the gate, he is also the only one who controls who gets through it. Humility in the face of Jesus' authority is of the highest order.

But I want to focus this morning on the great comfort that these images give us in this challenging time that we find ourselves in. We are invited to imagine ourselves as the sheep of his flock, in order to see what our relationship with the risen Christ is like. And the words of Psalm 23 provide a rich palate of feelings and blessings that describe well what it is like to know Christ as our shepherd.

1 The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

The writer, of course, is traditionally David, who has had plenty of time serving his family as a shepherd in order to think about his relationship with God, and how good God has been to him. Shepherds have a lot of time to think, to talk to themselves, and to talk to God. David is able to see that just as he is a shepherd to his flock of actual sheep, God is shepherd to him. In this state, he feels no want. He feels satisfied, and this satisfaction extends in front of him in time; because the lord is my shepherd, therefore I shall not want for anything. I will be alright.

2 He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; Of course, we have to get beyond the male pronouns, and move out of the metaphor and into our imaginations. For each human being, God is our guide, and our souls and our bodies long for the places that God provides for us. There is comfort there, rest, and peace. The place is plush, green, verdant, fertile, and peaceful. This is the space of comfort and rest, and it is this comfort and rest which has the power to restore our souls. How many of us feel like we can taste this peace and comfort for our souls, because we long to feel this way? Especially in these days of traumatic, radical change to our lives, when we are grieving the loss of our old comforts and securities, habits and social pastimes, how many of us desperately want our souls to be restored?

3 he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

Wherever I go, I am led by the hand of God in the right direction. The path is safe, not dangerous. If I trust God to lead me, I find the path is easy, not treacherous or rough. It is smooth and level, and right. God's path is just.

4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me.

This verse contains the great promise of God's presence with us in all circumstances, but especially in the experiences that scare us the most. Other older translations call this the valley of the shadow of death. There are subtle

ways in which death is around us, or haunting us all the time, but these would take some time to evoke for you. In our current situation, death has become much more of a threat, a specter, a force that we know we might not be able to outrun, particularly if we or someone we know has contracted the virus. Daily death counts are posted on every news channel and in the newspapers we read daily of stories of those who have died, stories of those who have barely survived, or those who have recovered after a long bout of illness. We simply pray that life won't take us through this valley. But if we must go there, God promises to be with us, leading us through it like our shepherd.

The rod and staff that the shepherd carries are stock and trade. We all know the image of the shepherd's crook, the long pole with a hooked end, for pulling, prodding, moving branches and brush out of the way, or for defending against predators. It is also something to lean on during the long hours of walking, standing, and waiting for the sheep to graze. Imagine the comfort that comes to the sheep when they hear the intermittent click of the staff against the rocks, when they see the end of the staff on the ground around the shepherd's feet as they follow. It's the signature tool of the shepherd, an extension of his presence with the sheep.

5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

This verse is about personal vindication, especially vindication in the presence of those who previously dismissed us, threatened us, or abused us. Our enemies will look on the favor God shows us, and will be humbled. The overflow of my cup refers to the blessings I enjoy. I don't link it to material or worldly possessions. There are too many poor people in the world to hang wealth on God's blessing. Wealth is a product of decisions, yes, but also of systems of privilege and the difference a good head-start can make.

The cup of blessing that David is referring to is the great joy in knowing that the God and creator of all things, Almighty God in heaven above, is really my greatest and most intimate personal companion, savior and guide. God is so close to me that my hairs on my head have been counted. God knows me better than I know myself, and God anticipates who I am becoming, and responds to my growth, my changing being, my development in ways that bless me even though I am ignorant of all the blessing. It is good to be known and loved by God.

6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long. Right now, what follows us around, everywhere we go, is the specter of death I mentioned earlier. Everywhere I go, I am reminded of death, every one I look at, a potential victim of forces we cannot control. But God promises other things will follow me. What are those things? Good luck, happy fortune, a lucky lottery ticket or a business success? No, what God promises will track me, follow me, pursue me with is goodness. Do you have goodness in your life? Take stock on a daily basis, when you walk outside, when you watch your kids, when you look into your partner's eyes, when you laugh and smile because of a friend, when you are fortunate to be able to taste the bounty of the earth for daily bread. Then in that state of awareness, of mindfulness, you are in the midst of God's goodness.

And Mercy, God's mercy, the mercy that comes from an understanding, ever patient, ever accommodating God, who is constant in forbearance, in love, in understanding, in grace, who turns a blind eye to our sins, our faults, our failures and weaknesses. God's mercy is with us wherever we go. And to feel that, to be aware of that goodness and mercy, to know and appreciate what a blessing it is to experience these gifts in our life, no matter what else may be going on around us, or in us, this is what gives birth to joy in our hearts, and leads to gratitude.

Are you thankful for these blessings? Are you thankful for your life, and for the goodness and mercy of God in your life, are you thankful that Christ makes known to you these good things, and that they don't depend on your worldly success, or your reputation in the eyes of a dog-eat-dog world. Are you thankful for love, and especially that God loves you as you are? Are you thankful for this shepherd and his attention to you? Then in gratitude, you pray, you sing, you gather with those of similar hearts, and you worship. You are in the house of the Lord. You are with God in praise, in thanksgiving, and in humble attention you address your heart to God and say, thank you Lord. This is the house of the Lord, and it's doors are always open. The gate is always ajar. There is room in this house for everyone, and it's day is coming, and will come soon, when we will all stand together in the house of the Lord and in the Lords' presence and we will sing, we will dance, we will cry with joy for the victory of the Lord, for the life he gives us that will not end.

If there is anything good coming from this pandemic, and the way it is changing our lives and our society, it might be this, that we start to live more deliberately in this sense of permanent awe and gratitude for God's goodness and mercy, and for the presence in our lives of so great a shepherd, who is with us always, in every circumstance, challenge or joy. Let us call on the great shepherd of the sheep, call him our Lord, and follow where he leads. Let us share our gratitude for his presence by leading others in the practice of humility, joy, and gratitude. Let us show compassion and solidarity with those who are less fortunate, who are suffering, and who seek justice. May we be molded in the shepherd's image, and find comfort in his teaching, his guidance, and feel at home in his secure embrace.

And may the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Jesus is the gate for the sheep.

This teaching is about who the sheep are, and about our connection to the shepherd.

It is also about the gatekeepers in this case, those who would control access to the sheepfold, and to Jesus.

But finally, it is also about the limits of this analogy. If we insist on sticking with the analogy, then the gate moves. The incorporation in the body is finally not up to us, but to the mercy and activity of God. God in Christ moves to incorporate us.

This chapter in the Gospel of John is Jesus' continuing attack on the blind religious leaders whom he faces, and who dismiss his teachings and claims.

In order to put the blind religious leaders in their places, Jesus uses different "figures" to describe his role, and his relationship to his flock, those who believe in him and seek to follow him. The two main figures in this passage are vv. 1-5, Jesus as the shepherd who guards his flock, and vv. 7-10, Jesus as the gate of the sheepfold, who protects his flock from intruders.

The effect of these figures, or metaphors, is to create a strong concept of the church as a group of people that belong to Christ, who are members of his flock. They are the sheep in the sheepfold, who are guarded by the gate of Christ. They are protected by Christ, so that the blind religious leaders and others cannot mislead them or take them away from Christ.

The first figure is like a parable in that it has many characters. The sheepfold is where the sheep are kept, especially at night. It protects them from intruders, animals of prey, and other dangers. The shepherd is the one who leads them in and out of the sheepfold. Also, the gate is there to help this movement in and out. Anyone who comes into the fold by digging under or climbing over the walls is a false member of the fold. That person is not to be trusted. The true shepherd is the one who has the authority to enter by the gate. The true shepherd is recognized by the gatekeeper, who opens the gate for him. The true shepherd is known to the sheep, and they follow him. They will not trust the voice of strangers or usurpers.

In the context of John's church, the crisis in authority was playing itself out in the conflict between John and his Christian group, and those other leaders of the larger Jewish community who were rejecting John and his Christian group. Thus, Jesus in John's gospel is tough on those leaders who confront him, or argue with him, and reject his teaching. Let the members of the larger group, who want to reject the Christians in their midst, be clear; their authority is rejected by the Christian group. They are the intruders, who want to enter the sheepfold by another way. The true shepherd is Christ himself, who is with his sheep, cares for them, and leads them in and out of the sheepfold.

But this situation is not unique to John's church alone. These dynamics play out in lots of circumstances in the history of the church, in many different places, and through many different periods of history. Churches and congregations are often the platform for conflicts of authority, where different leaders are pitted against each other. We understand how the integrity of the church, the flock, is threatened, and how splits in the church can come from such conflicts. What we can take from John's lesson here is that in the end, Christ himself remains the final arbiter of the truth of his presence in the midst of his flock. Leaders who see Christ clearly, and teach according to his Gospel, are legitimate. They are the true gatekeepers who see Christ clearly, who can open the gate for him to enter into his church.

The problem of course, is that over the centuries, the church has always been fractured, riven with division and split by such conflicts of authority. Our own day and age is different only in that the fights are no longer so bloody, literally, and that therefore, the splits happen with much less physical, social and economic harm to the church and its surrounding society. The sheer number of church denominations is testimony to this truth.

If you are expecting me to claim final authority for our interpretation, and for the integrity of our gate to the sheepfold, I will humbly defer. Instead, I stand within the Lutheran tradition of offering our interpretation, in public and with no secret or esoteric doctrines that only the initiated are privy to, to the larger church world, and ask that we be corrected where wrong, challenged where questionable, and shown how to rectify our error. Until dialogue with other churches, and the work of theologians through history changes our theology, we humbly submit our case. This is the stance Luther took at the beginning of the

Reformation, and it remains our stance today. Show us convincingly where we are in error, and we will amend our ways.

John's Jesus uses this imagery to speak to the church, but also to challenge the false leaders in his midst. Verse 6 says that they did not understand this "figure of speech", and so he took a different tack, and changes the metaphor around a bit. In verses 7-10, Jesus now claims that he is the gate for the sheep. All who have come before him are thieves and bandits, in other words, those who claim the attention and devotion of the sheep by stealing them away from Jesus. Then the image is tightened. Since Jesus is the gate, those who enter by way of this gate are saved, and will find this blessing of "good pasture". Jesus' salvation will be known by the life he gives, which will be experience in abundance. The usurpers, who are enemies of Christ, cause further division, and try to steal the elect away from Christ.

The main message of these two figures of speech is that Christ is the true authority on his church, his flock, and that those who are truly part of that flock recognize, respond to and follow Christ. It is a simple truth of the church. It should be a source of encouragement for us, and for all who believe they recognize Jesus' voice in their church, its' teachings, its prayers and its songs. And denominations are simply vehicles for expressing the sometimes large and often slight or even trivial differences in our understanding and interpretation of who Jesus is and what he demands of his church. Given this situation, we must soften our stance towards others in the faith, and leave the final differentiation to Jesus in the end. My advice to Christians is to be hard on one's own account, but soft on others. Do you feel sure of your place in the true church of Christ? Wonderful, but repent all the more of your unbelief. Are you sure that you have identified other who are not a part of Christ's true church? Fine, but understand that in the end, it's not your place to make those judgements.

What teaching are we left with, and how are we to move on from this teaching about the nature of the flock, and the identity of the good shepherd? Well, the whole point of the incarnation was to extend the grace of God to the world in a tangible, quite human way. Grace is what comes for us, grace is what calls us. Grace creates the sheepfold for our safety, and grace is the gate through which we all must enter. Grace is so perfectly grace that the metaphors can't do justice to the full truth of grace. For in grace we proclaim that the sheepfold is wider and



more spacious than we ever thought, and that the gatekeepers, all who err and stray and fall from grace repeatedly, are not finally stricken from the list of sheep. They too must rely on grace, even despite the errors of their own testimony that were proclaimed in their pride and hubris. And finally, the gate is wider than we thought, in grace. Or said another way, the gate can even be moved to encompass those who stumble before they reach the gate.

Correlate with “No one comes to the father but by me.”

In the end, the “gate” we pass through is Christ’s death and resurrection. That we believe he did it for us, gives us hope and faith