

Sermon 3-22-20

Today's psalm and Gospel reading offer us words of deep comfort and joy in these weeks of fear and concern.

Psalm 23 may be the most known and quoted of all scriptural passages. The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want.

On my recent seminary trip to Kenya, I was asked to preach in Marich, in a very rural church in the Kenyan bush. I had already constructed the sermon on Psalm 23 when I was told that Marich was a herding community that included nomadic shepherds. So to talk about sheep and shepherds to this crowd, well certainly they knew more than I would ever know about them.

For those who have not traveled to Kenya, outside of the bigger cities, sheep and goats can be found everywhere on the four lane and dirt roads that cover the country. These were not the fluffy, white sheep we see at Grant's Farm here in St. Louis, or the chubby cartoon characters in TV commercials for mattresses. These were weathered animals, used to being outside, some with matted fur and feet covered in red dirt from wandering the roadside. These sheep were herded by a single child or by a man or an older woman carrying a long stick, guiding them. Sometimes the sheep were harnessed by ropes around their necks and the ropes were attached to sticks, anchored into the earth, each animal parked a few yards from another just feet from the road. The sheep chewed on grass until the herder returned to safely retrieve them.

One Saturday, I noticed a group of sheep. A large, single sheep headed a group of about fifteen other sheep as they marched home on a dirt road. One sheep

though, did not follow. He meandered along, and stopped to munch on a spot of green here, a spot of grass there. I identified with this wandering sheep, with its independence. I spoke to the congregation at Marich about that odd sheep that insists on going its own way. They nodded, as they knew about wayward sheep.

Perhaps we all are from time to time, of the mind that we do not need to follow the crowd, we do not need to follow the rules, we do not need to mind our shepherd. But when we get to times like these, we need to get in line, one behind the other. We need to follow the rules, practice good self-care, and most importantly, we need to stick close to our shepherd.

Psalm 23 tells us that God is our shepherd. God will provide and our needs will be met. We are to be mindful that God is in control. We do not have kneeling rails in church here for extra seating. We have kneeling rails to revere God, to place us in our proper relationship of human to God, our creator and our shepherd.

Here in the U.S. in my generation, and those that follow, we have not faced a crisis like this one. When I was in grade school, we had bomb drills and practiced hiding under our desks, as though that would protect us. As adults we were terrified by 9:11 events for weeks and months and avoided air travel. But many of us have little recent practice with tolerating worry along with living a joyful life.

The urban poor in Kenya have something to teach us about how to live with this contradiction. In Nairobi, there is a poor community where the houses and business are crushed together. These are hundreds of lean-to structures with tin roofs. There is garbage in the streets and the creek that runs through the area. If

you have seen the movie, Slumdog Millionaire, you can picture this poverty and the shocking lack of sanitation.

And yet in this oppressed space, life goes on, earnestly, happily. As we were driving through this area, there were women with toddlers, doing their shopping, talking and waving their hands, cutting deals with street vendors for lentils and rice. There was a boy of about ten with a big smile and he waved wildly at our bus. He ran after our bus, laughing, and waving. We laughed and waved back. These people held want in one hand and joy in the other.

I think we can learn from this. In this time of concern for a global disease, we can take actions to protect ourselves, sanitizer in hand, but we rely on God. We may walk through the shadow of death, yet we believe that God is with us. It is not that we have nothing to fear. Rather, in our concern, we can rest in the firm knowledge that God will care for us. And because of this, we can hold our concern in one hand, and joy and the love of our God and one another, in the other.

And there is another take away. We are all connected by our humanity. This disease does not know or care whether we are Chinese, or Iranian or Italian or from the U.S.. It does not discern if we are wealthy or we are poor, if our healthcare system is strong or weak. We are one people. We are human in our vulnerability and our mortality. We are in solidarity in our suffering. We can hold on to our relatedness. As the Apostle Paul says, we are after all, one Body in Christ. If there ever was a moment in our time that made Paul's words come alive, this is it.

Our gospel reading teaches us that there can be transformation even in loss. At the beginning of this passage, we find the blind man, blind since birth, shunned at

a time when disease was believed to be caused by sin. Jesus points out that this man was born blind “so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” Jesus intends to make this blind man an example, to produce a miracle that will reveal that Jesus is God.

John gives us a vivid description here: Jesus spits on the ground, and then makes mud with his saliva, and spreads the mud on the man’s eyes. Jesus instructs the man to wash in the pool and the man’s sight is restored. The neighbors are astonished. The formerly blind man tells them what Jesus did. The neighbors bring him to the Pharisees who question the man and declare that Jesus is not from God because he has performed this event on the Sabbath. Even an interrogation of the man’s parents does not satisfy the Pharisees nor does further questioning of the man and they drive the man away. Jesus seeks and finds the man and when the man questions who Jesus is, because recall that the man had not yet physically seen Jesus, Jesus replies: “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” The man then said “Lord, I believe.” John tells us, “And he worshipped him.”

A closer look at this blind man reveals the manifestation of his conversion. As the story opens, he was an adult, blind since birth and so was marginalized, reviled. This passage suggests that even his parents are reluctant to claim him. Because he was blind, he could not work and so was a beggar. When his sight was suddenly restored, he was no longer disabled and therefore no longer marginalized. We do not know his name, and we don’t hear from him again. We can imagine how his life would have changed: he might have found work, might have found love, had a family and lived a full life. We can imagine that having been healed, he would

thereafter put a coin in a beggar's cup and would offer a kind word to the leper. He was no longer blind physically and was now sighted of the Spirit.

Physical blindness here is a metaphor for spiritual blindness. In contrast to this man, the Pharisees who were physically sighted, remained spiritually blind. John's message, above all throughout his gospel, is that Jesus is the son of God, the light of the world. This passage explains that Jesus restores the spiritual the sight of the world.

Our gospel tells us that Jesus will restore our spiritual infirmity even today. In this crisis, we will certainly face possible grave illness and financial crisis. Things change rapidly. Since drafting this sermon, one of my daughters was laid off from work and I am now working from home. Tomorrow we will face further restrictions on our movement. But we will learn from this event. We will find that we are not invincible people. When faced with our mortality we will we will humbly accept our humanity and the humanity of others. We will practice self-care and others-care. We will quiet down, not forever looking outside for answers and distractions, but living quietly and mindfully. We will mature in our faith in God and in Jesus our holy teacher. And perhaps we will see more clearly from these dark times than from the brightness of abundance and power that we thought we had. As Mother Camie said last week, this time, this event, will pass. We will recover as individuals and as the community of Christ.

We may be forever changed to share spiritual sight if we hold our hearts open for the lessons this suffering will teach us. And most importantly, may we

embrace a renewed commitment to do the work of Jesus on this earth, now in this moment and for as long as we have breath.