

“Herded into Life” (3May2020)
John10:1-10; Psalm23

Typically known as “Good Shepherd Sunday,” this 4th Sunday of Easter in all three years of the lectionary includes old reliable Psalm 23 and has a part from John 10. In the part this year, Jesus doesn’t say he’s the Good Shepherd. He kind of describes shepherds generally and says he’s the gate. But we probably wouldn’t find it as appealing to celebrate this as “Good Gate Sunday.”

Even though this comes around every year, we’re probably encountering it differently right now, just as we’re holding our theological ponderings in a more precious way, and as we’re cherishing community in uniquely, and as we’re even keeping track of our toilet paper supply more closely, and as we’re valuing the resources of faith more intensely and dearly while they are held over and against the coronavirus.

Clearly the virus remains front and center for us. Perhaps you also hear it like I do, that when Jesus talks about what comes to steal life and kill and destroy, that may be foremost in our sense. COVID-19 is a thief and marauder and robber, robbing people of life and wellbeing, taking away what we should have. That feels clear in these days.

That thought propelled me into this reading, in reflecting on what steals life, and how Jesus gives life.

The original sense was of turning to the true life-giving God and away from false gods or idols, bad religious paths that take away life. Jesus’ words were probably an indictment of the leaders of his day, that those who ran things were doing it for selfish benefit, not for the good of others. When they should’ve been caring, they instead were looking to enrich themselves or to enhance their power. Clearly, we would not have to think hard to come up with leaders we would indict for failing to care for the people under them.

To move ahead a couple hundred years from the Gospel of John takes us to the image on the cover of your bulletin, if you want to flip to that or scroll up to see it. That is still early in church history, as one of the first extant artworks with a Christian theme.



One of the things people notice about that earliest artwork was that the Good Shepherd seemed to be how the early church chose to represent Jesus. He wasn’t portrayed on the cross; maybe that was still too present and terrifying of a reality. He wasn’t shown with a crown as a glorious ruler. He was with his sheep.

The next thing is that these were usually found in catacombs, underground burial chambers. This painting comes from an enormous set of tunnels more than seven miles long. This all tells us something important about death and about having life in the fullest for those early Christians.

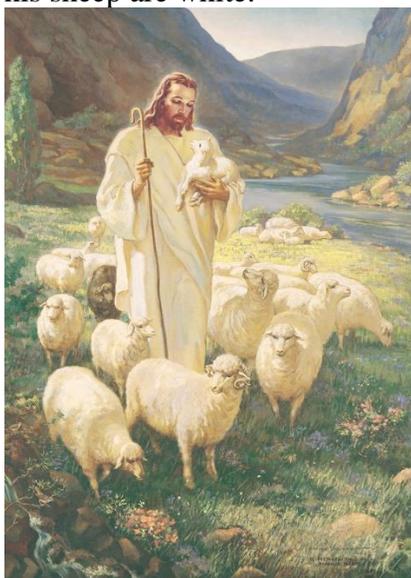
Partly there’s a thought that they had the artwork in those subterranean crypts because that’s where they hung out. That’s where church was. They gathered there for worship. Though it seems not to have been the norm, perhaps they did it to be in seclusion, when being out in public was forbidden, or put them in danger. Again, for those bad leaders who imperiled life, the Roman Empire was against the church and sometimes would even kill people found to be practicing Christianity. In turn, the Christians were a nuisance to the dominant culture, refusing the ways of empire. Maybe we think about that, how our pursuit of life means we reject dominant modes, and maybe even try to subvert them. Our caring and sharing models something very different from the careless death-dealing powers.

The larger more likely reason that church gathered in the catacombs, among tombs, was because that embodied their fuller sense of life as the church. They were still the communion of saints, the gathered community, even with those who had died. In some very important way, death

did not separate or dismember the church. Even through that, they expected still to be led to fullness of life. The Good Shepherd painted in those places would be the one whose voice they recognized, calling them out from death into life. Or calling them to rise, to get up. Even the word they gave these places, “cemetaries,” was the Greek word essentially for a bedroom, a place for sleeping, literally a resting place. Death didn’t and couldn’t destroy life.

Maybe we share that sense now, as we worship in strange places, that we are nevertheless inextricably bound together as community, and nothing can separate us, even as we are socially distant. As death threatens and looms around, you hear the voice of Jesus, your Good Shepherd, calling you to join this flock as he leads you out of the shadows of death and even now you find relief and this resting place, a life-giving moment, a pause for the promise spoken here that interrupts the power of death lurking around.

From the intensity of that understanding, of Jesus very fully bringing you from death into life, the next version on page 9 of your bulletin may seem trite and kitschy. The one on the left is by Warner Sallman, who did what’s said to be the most ever reproduced image of Jesus, the Head of Christ, with over a half billion versions floating around, instilling in us that Jesus didn’t have dark skin like he did in the catacombs but was this blue-eyed bearded pious Scandinavian. And of course his sheep are white.



Now, there’s a lot about it that I would typically grumble against. The image next to it portrays some of my standard sarcastic humor.



Obviously the real version of that painting has Jesus cradling and gazing tenderly at a lamb. I found this version at a now-defunct brewpub, of Jesus with a velociraptor. I’m not sure exactly how to

interpret that mix of paleontology and theology, except that it was maybe the ancestor of our MCC chickens. I do like that Jesus doesn’t hold out for only cradling the cute ones of us, but also scoops into his arms the ugly or mean or those facing the violent cataclysms of the exploding volcano in the background and maybe extinction-level events, through all of space and time. The Jesus who goes off in search of the one lost sheep to carry it home on his shoulders will track you down, no matter what.

Anyway, for the sweetsy Jesus, this week I was reflecting that he does have his place and I don’t need to put him down. If you need some comforting through hard days and just want something that feels pleasant and easy and serene, then you may find it in Jesus. Or, better, Jesus will find you for it.

To return to the beginning, though we recognize this week what steals life from us, what robs us, with our minds predominantly on disease, I don’t have as easy of a time saying what the life is Jesus is offering or how he is trying to encourage it. I don’t exactly know what to proclaim about having life to the fullest. I’m not willing only to have it be an after-life. It’s clearly not relegated to maximizing the number of days here, because then Jesus would only be about a long life; for example, by keeping the virus at bay. When Jesus is the gate, I guess it’s not about walling off the bad things and keeping you protected from any harm. I really like MaryJane’s version of care and love for chickens, and I think that parallels Jesus, but I’m not sure how.

In conversation online for our weekly pastor's Bible study, one person suggested we're missing out on a lot of life right now, and that that's disappointing. I'm holding onto that for our graduating seniors and our youth and for facing income loss and all the other diminishment I hear from you. Another pastor replied, however, that maybe the smaller and quieter version of things is actually helping us to see life better, or to know what's important, to be mindful of what we value. Either side of that seems true, I guess! So life may or may not be the accumulation of stuff, or the accumulation of experiences, or the grounding of relationships, or healing for the length of days. The reading doesn't really clarify. It just says life is the best with Jesus.

All I can finally do is to point you back to the old reliable words of the 23rd Psalm, to let those hold onto you and foster faith and be the voice finding you and leading you again beyond fears into life.

The Lord is your shepherd. That's true even when you need or think you want something more.

Maybe you can find still waters to walk beside, or remember a favorite lake, and know some calm, like the calm of Jesus' presence.

In all green pastures, the places of abundance in beauty and for nourishing your hungers, God is providing, to satisfy you.

Through dark valleys, the things that threaten, even in catacombs of death, you may rest securely, comforted.

And as it feels like you're dwelling in your own house day after day without end, you are nevertheless in the family of God, a member of this household, to share blessings and to live forever.