

Sermon for May 3, 2020

Four Sunday After Easter

“Good Shepherd Sunday”

Beloved Friends,

We gather our hearts and our spirits together in these strange times. My prayer is that we will know, deeply remember, the links that bind us together, and that our faith will increase. Our faith, our remembering that we have a beloved teacher, healer, friend. Even though we cannot see him, blessed are the lives of those who remember that they are not alone, but are the cherished family of the One Creator who made us all, who knew us all, from deep within our mothers' wombs. That is the reality that can never be taken away.

Today we hear from the Gospel of John that Jesus is describing himself as a Good Shepherd. So I think it was like this in the times of Jesus: the shepherds would be out all day with their flocks, and then bring them back to a common enclosure to pass the night. In the morning – I bet really early! – the shepherds would go to the enclosure and call their sheep. The sheep would know their human and come. The Good Shepherd, the one who feeds the sheep, cares for the sick, tends the injured. The Good Shepherd knows the sheep, and the sheep are in peace. What a message for us in these days. Beyond everything, beneath everything, we are cared for.

But like all the messages of the Gospel – it's not straightforward or easy. Jesus is a contradiction, and we always have to hold that contradiction in our thinking about him. The hymn today, by Sylvia Dunstan says it perfectly: You Lord are both Lamb and Shepherd, you are gift and cost, you lived defeat, and you lived victory, you bring peace – and strife. The only way to approach the truth of our faith is to hold these contradictions, without needing to reconcile them. Jesus is both death and life.

That's because this being human is hard. It is hard for some people almost all the time. And it is hard for all people sometimes. Unbearably hard. To be human means to be open to all things: loss, illness, death. To be a priest means that I

know many of these stories. I know that there is no life without heartbreak. If we try to sweep these things under the carpet, we will suffer even greater things.

These days, this week, every week, it seems like the loss is hard to comprehend. The loss of so many people, so many things in these days of the pandemic, added on top the insane killing spree that took place now almost two weeks ago in Nova Scotia. There was the helicopter crash this week, where members of the Canadian Forces died, young people, with families and homes, who were out in the world, doing their best to care for others.

Last Thursday night, I think it was, we were glancing at our computers before sleep – bad idea! – when something caught my eye. I couldn't help but read it: in Manaus Brazil, deep in the Amazon jungle, the virus has landed, and is now tearing through the heavily populated neighbourhoods. Many of you remember – I was in Rome last year, for a meeting about protecting the Amazon. Most of the Brazilians I met were from Manaus, a city of 2 million people, that I had never heard of before. I got busy writing to all my new friends there? Are you all right? Of course, I haven't heard much, and we can only begin to imagine the heartbreak that is going on in places around the globe.

It's hard to remember when we are living in this paradise of green and flowers, where the hardest thing for many of us is isolation and inconvenience. But I know, there is really loneliness and loss for us too. And unimaginable before these days – we cannot be physically together, as we would be ordinarily, during these hardest times.

And somehow, with everything mostly shut down, some of us find ourselves busier than ever! It is so hard to connect, but somehow we keep insisting on it, and so we are mostly staring at screens at little stop and start pictures of our beloved friends and families. Imperfect, but better than nothing, I suppose. Sometimes I wonder if it would be better if we just quieted down everything for a while. You know that the best way to hear God's voice is to be silent. Could it be that God is busy calling to us – and we are on another Zoom meeting, and we miss the call?

At night, when everything seems harder, I have a trick for lulling myself to sleep. Not a trick really at all. I'm not sure when, but sometime ago, when I wake up with those 3am worries, I simply pray. I pray the Jesus prayer, which is so simple.

It goes like this: Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner. If you say that over and over again, if you let it sink into your worried heart, you may just find that God is there waiting for you.

And Jesus' whole purpose in coming to earth was to remind us of this truth: You are loved, We are loved. Everyone of us. Our faith does not obliterate or ignore the contradictions of our complicated lives, our faith rests deep on these things that are true and are different. God is a Lamb. God is a Shepherd. We are all faulted humans, We are all beloved children. Jesus is a human and Jesus is the force of the universe that moves beyond all telling and all knowing.

We are invited into this rich life, we are invited to rest beside the still waters. The Creator of Heaven and Earth has invited us to a rich feast. We are invited to live our lives with abundance and generosity. That is our daily bread. Let us never forget.