

Acts 2:42-47, Psalm 23, 1 Peter 2:19-25, John 10:1-10

INTRO

Well, good morning, and thank you for tuning in to this recording for today, the fourth Sunday of the Easter season. It's a Sunday that is also known as Good Shepherd Sunday — normally in the liturgical calendar we recognize special events in the life of Jesus or in the life of the church with special Sundays. Good Shepherd Sunday however isn't based on a specific event in the New Testament, but rather on a theme — the theme of Jesus as our Good Shepherd. And we'll see this theme reflected through our readings this morning.

So I'll invite you to pause this recording once again, and take the time to read the set lessons for today. The first lesson is Acts 2:42-47, which is a great description of the life of the early Christian church community. Then Psalm 23 — one of the most beloved passages of Scripture, acknowledging the care & protection of God our shepherd. Then 1 Peter 2:19-25, which describes Jesus as a shepherd who suffered for us, his sheep. And then finally our gospel lesson, John 10:1-10, in which Jesus claims to be the only shepherd through whom we, his sheep come to know abundant life. They are great lessons, so take a few minutes to read them, and then you can resume this recording

THE THREE FACES OF OUR SELVES

I came across a bit this week about how we tend to have three different faces that we show to the world — three different fronts that are seen by three different groups of people (<https://www.1517.org/articles/god-dont-you-care-hat-im-drowning>, accessed May 1, 2020). We have a public face which we reveal to our co-workers, our neighbours, or to the general public — this is usually our best attempt at showing ourselves to be upstanding citizens, or respectable people like when people ask, "How are you?" you automatically respond, "Fine." We have a more private face that we show to our close friends & family, in which the nuances of our personalities really come out. And then we have an inner face, or an inner self that is known really only to God.

You may have a reputation as a serious, no-nonsense co-worker or boss, while your spouse or friends see you as a stressed out workaholic, and yet meanwhile God alone sees your deep fears & insecurities that cause you to behave as you do. Three different faces or perceptions of ourselves that are shown to three different groups, expressing sometimes three different personas or emotional groundings.

And the more stress we're under, the more violent the storms that we try to weather the more our interior faces begin to show publicly. We all know people who are more naturally transparent — who don't by default answer "Fine" when you ask how they're doing. And we all know individuals who just don't seem to make any attempt at concealing any of what they're going through — who seem to travel through life swinging wildly from ecstatic one day to hot mess the

next. And as draining as these individuals can be, they are a breath of fresh air, because they make no attempt at presumption.

ENDURING WELL, OR NOT SO WELL

Well, sooner or later we all go through trying circumstances, and the inner faces of our lives start to rear themselves publicly, and I expect that these last weeks have perhaps brought out some of your inner face, or your inner self. In our lesson from 1 Peter, Peter is calling the church to endure suffering, and to endure it well. He says,

“But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.” —1 Peter 2:20-23

Jesus didn’t retaliate, or complain, or throw a pity party when he was unjustly condemned & suffered, and so we should follow in his example.

Now, I don’t know about you, but when I go through hardship, I don’t handle it too well. We made a timely purchase just before all of this social distancing & shut downs occurred — we got a basketball hoop for our kids. The boys had been dreaming of getting one all winter, and they had been saving up their dollars, and as soon as the weather started to warm up we went to the store & got a hoop. And it’s been great, because they’ve been spending hours out there on the street playing basketball.

The other day I was playing with them, and Ben went up for a rebound & he hit the ball right at my face — it got me square in the nose. Now, do you want to know how I handled it? Not very well — it hurt! My first thought was, “My nose is broken!” And then, when I realized that it wasn’t broken, let me tell you there was no more fooling around — I was out there to win that game, & I made sure that the boys didn’t stand a chance. Now how juvenile is that?!?

It’s a silly example, but have you ever gotten your hackles up when you suffered something you thought was unjust or unfair? How have you responded to Covid? Do you ever say things like, “What did I do to deserve this?” It’s a way for us to try to make sense of what we’re going through. But deserving or not deserving has nothing to do with it.

For all of the times when we don’t respond well to hardship — whether it’s in fits of rage, or of saying something mean and cutting to someone, or through the gallon of ice cream that we polished off last night with the m&m’s & the chocolate sauce. (I’m also notorious for that by the way — “There’s just a little more than one serving here — I may as well finish it off...”) Whether we tend to respond to suffering by throwing a pity party — regardless how we handle it — Peter reminds us of how Jesus responded to suffering, to unjust suffering, again:

“He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.” —1 Peter 2: 22-25

So how ought we to suffer? (And Peter’s talking about suffering for our faith by the way, not about arbitrary suffering like getting hit in the face with a basketball.) Well, we learn to suffer by looking at how Jesus suffered, not fighting back, not paying an eye for an eye. If you want to switch the analogy to sheep & shepherd, we’re all sheep who’ve gone astray in regards to this.

CHURCH IN THE AGE OF CORONA — LIVING INTO OUR ABUNDANT LIFE

And this is what’s so remarkable about our first lesson that we read today, from Acts 2. It’s a description of the life of the early church — a church that was swept up & captivated by the vision of a crucified & resurrected Saviour — of a God who suffered & died so that they might live, and live abundantly. We read that they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching (that is to Scripture & the message of the Gospel), to fellowship, to the breaking of bread (communion), and to the prayers. There were signs and wonders being done through them. And they sold their possessions & shared what they had to ensure that no one went without. It’s a very simple, very radical way of living out their faith.

Passages like this function as a bit of a corrective for us, reminding us that every once in a while it doesn’t hurt to hit “reset” in the church, and take things back to the basics, rather than getting all caught up in strategies, or customs, or programs. The church is a body that prays, studies God’s Word, shares, fellowships, and participates in the sacraments. And in a time when so much of what we normally do as church has been taken away from us, perhaps it’s time we hit “reset” & reevaluate what we do & why, returning to the basics of our lives of faith. The church doesn’t do these things from an effort at impressing God, or of getting his approval, it happens organically as the Spirit moves us, as we respond to the reality that we have a Good Shepherd who watches over us & has saved us!

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

We see our need of good shepherds in times of crisis. We also see some pretty good & some pretty bad examples of shepherds today. I read an article this week about one national leader who is sitting on stockpiles of cash reserves, while refusing to distribute enough to care for the people of his own country. Now, that’s a bad shepherd — a bad leader, who is looking after number 1 instead of his own people.

I’m not a farmer, and I don’t know a lot about sheep, but I do know that sheep don’t have fangs, and they don’t have claws, and they don’t spit venom, or stick you with pointy quills. They’re really quite defenseless. They wander, & they get picked off by predators, or are stolen pretty easily. And if they try to fight off a wolf on their own, it doesn’t end well for them.

Sheep need a shepherd — they need a shepherd that is strong, that is awake to their needs, that will defend them & will guide them, and will provide for them. A shepherd who is true and who is good. Don't try to fight off the wolves of life on your own — you can't do it You need a shepherd.

We may have three faces — our public face, our private face, and our interior face — but God has only one — it's the face of Jesus. And he carries us through the storms of life — he shepherds us from harm & danger, caring for us & making sure that we flourish under him.

So if you're freaking out whenever you encounter hardship & suffering, if you don't handle it well, know that there is a shepherd who handled it for you, who suffered & died & rose again so that you might find pasture & have life and have it abundantly.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters.

He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness

for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil,

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff,

they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

all the days of my life,

and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord

for ever. —Psalm 23