

Easter 4 Year A – May 3, 2020
Psalm 23; John 10:1-11
Epiphany, Winnipeg
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First...just something you might not have noticed, and I'm not sure where to go with it. But it's worth pointing out anyway. While this Fourth Sunday of Easter is sometimes called Good Shepherd Sunday, Jesus never gets around to calling himself the Good Shepherd in this text we just heard now. He talks about sheep. He talks about thieves and bandits. He does talk about a shepherd and about a gatekeeper who opens the gate to let the shepherd come in. He talks about strangers. But before he ever gets around to calling himself the good shepherd, he calls himself – did you hear it? – the gate. I have never heard of a church called “Christ the Gate Lutheran Church.” Maybe you have – let me know if you know of one.... We'll come back through the gate in a few minutes.

But for now, back to some sheep and a shepherd: The shepherd has had a long day working with the sheep to lead them from one place to another, doing, oh, whatever it is that shepherds do along the way.... And they come to some fresh cool water in a grassy meadow and the sheep all crowd onto the banks to dip down and get a drink and get refreshed and cooled off after hours in the hot hot sun wearing the hot hot sweaters that nature has bestowed upon every living sheep. And as the sheep settle down to drink and to cool off and rest for a few moments the shepherd has a quick look around to make sure everything is as it should be, and she finds a nice patch of grass under a tree and leans back against the tree and looks around and says, “Wow. What a gorgeous day.” And the shepherd soaks up the scene and settles in and enjoys the shade, having a quiet few moments with the sheep before they all get up and get moving again.

I think we fall into a trap sometimes of thinking that somehow God is really serious and busy all the time...just saying and doing important God things. But I don't know, maybe God, maybe the shepherd isn't just working hard all the time. Maybe the shepherd enjoys being with the sheep, and wants nothing more than to rest with the sheep when they are finding rest by the water. And – the shepherd also wants nothing more than to be with the sheep when the sheep are afraid and the walls of the valley are closing in and the light is being blocked out. That's where the shepherd is found. Where the waters are still and peaceful. But also where the waters freeze and break up flood a city and first nations along the Athabasca. Those are all the places where we'll meet the shepherd. Because the shepherd loves the sheep.

Jesus pauses for a minute at the end of this reading we heard today, but just before that he says this: "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to kill and to steal and destroy. I came that they – the sheep – may have life and have it abundantly." Now I think we all know that having "life abundantly" doesn't mean that Jesus promises that we will be rich, or that Jesus will somehow make us happy all the time, or that life will just roll smoothly along. Promises for those things might as well be made by thieves and bandits because they just won't pan out in the end, and if an abundant life is just a wealthy life or an easy life, we could use up all of our strength and energy trying to chase that down. And these days, especially, we all know how fragile wealth and health can be in the face of a virus you can't even see.

The abundant life that Jesus talks about is maybe as simple as this: we live out all of our days in the company of the God who first breathed life into creation and who still breathes life over still waters and through scary and gloomy places. Sometimes we know it, sometimes we're not sure, but the one who gives life is among us and promising that there will always be more life. Because the shepherd loves the sheep.

The abundant life that Jesus talks about is maybe as simple as this: We live out all of our days in the company of Jesus, the good shepherd...in the company of Jesus, who is also called the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, who heals what is broken in the world, who raises up and breathes life into what is dead in the world. We live in the company of the Lamb who has died and risen; who lives among us sheep, whether we rest or whether we struggle. Because the shepherd loves the sheep.

And maybe the abundant life that Jesus talks about is as simple as this: The shepherd looks after sheep, and sheep...come in flocks. There are other sheep with us, and that matters so much, especially when we have to face the darkest valleys and the most frightening waters. We're in a flock, even if we're socially distanced at a graveside, or zooming with other sheep, or waving through the window from the second floor balcony. We're in a flock; an abundant flock. We're not alone. Because the shepherd loves the sheep.

So what to do with that strange thing that Jesus says, “I am the gate.”
(shrug??)

When you step through the door, into another room in the house, out into the yard, out onto the street, Jesus the gate swings open and sends you to wherever you’re going next, and goes with you to wherever you’re going next, and promises that wherever you go, wherever we go, we will find pasture...we’ll have all that we need, like the psalm says, because the one who gives us life is there.

When you step back through the door, back into the house, back into the apartment or the hotel room or wherever you spend your days, Jesus the gate swings open and welcomes you in, welcomes us in, and promises that wherever we go, at home or away, resting or in fear...we will find pasture...and the shepherd who is the lamb is keeping us company there. AMEN.