



Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 2020

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

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[Acts 2:42-47](#) [Psalm 23](#) [I Peter 2:19-25](#) [John 10:1-10](#)

Christ is risen. Alleluia, friends. Alleluia!

During this Easter Season, this is Good Shepherd Sunday. Sheep! We all love sheep, right? They're so fluffy and cute. Mostly. Like any animals, they too can be ornery. But, sheep and chicks and calves – all those beautiful images of spring. Farms are greening, trees are flowering, sheep and goats and cattle are readying to return to pasture.

One of our scripture texts for today is Acts 2. It marks what that early Christian community was like, at the birth and early growth of the church in the earliest time, just after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension – and following the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the igniting of a new fire in the hearts and minds of people that spread across the entire Roman Empire and out beyond into the wide world.

This picture of the Church in Acts 2 – this is the picture we want to seek and find again for ourselves as the Church today, as followers of Jesus together. We want that fresh springtime of the renewing, invigorating, stirring breath and fire of the Holy Spirit. We want that companionship, too, that comes through in this description from Acts.

In some ways, this is a hard picture for us think about today, as we continue our practices of social distancing and careful handling. What we hear in Acts 2 is, in part, what we have missed most.

But there are elements in Acts 2 that are about what we do in our households, and how we care for one another day to day in regular life and not in big gatherings. *"They would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need... they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people."* I want to encourage you to think about what we have done during this time for the sake of our own households' spiritual lives and for the care of others – and what we can continue to grow and strengthen from this unique time.

This time that has been more like some moments in the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures. Job in isolation of loss and of an affliction that laid him low in the dust. The ancient Egyptians experiencing one plague after another that called for response but also turned their world upside down.

Maybe most akin to our recent experience is the Flood. Noah and his family, stuck inside an ark – yes, a really big boat, but crammed full with animals of every kind they could find – for forty days and forty nights. Now, there's a family that had to learn how to get along better in a time of intense isolation like no other, when a great flood had claimed the lives of people far and wide and left them alone in a closed boat, without news from the outside, without other contact, without sign of land, with stormy

waters and no clear end in sight and being at the mercy of the movement of the waves for any direction.

At the end of this time, Noah took caution seriously. The rains stopped, and the water began to calm and recede. The boat came to rest finally on a high ridge or mountain – but was there enough land to go out on, safely, from the boat?

That is the kind of time we are now in, friends. As Idaho prepares to open more of its businesses and organizations again, this is being done with caution and with slow and measured steps. We do not leap back into high gear and throw all doors open and gather in crowds again, all at once.

Like Noah, leaders of our nations and regions and cities, of our businesses and our social and educational institutions, of our churches and communities of care, all are considering the question, “When and how quickly is it safe to return?”

Noah opens a hatch in the ark and lets in fresh light, as he seeks the help of some of the creatures with them on the ark. He takes a raven and sets it free to fly. But days and days pass, and the raven does not return, because the raven’s stamina was strong. So Noah tried again, and set a dove – a pigeon – free to fly. The dove returned exhausted the first time, so Noah knew there was no place for it to rest or live long. On its second flight, a week later, the dove returned with a bit of branch and leaf from an olive tree. And Noah knew that the waters were receding down to a level where there were remnants of human farming. One more week, and Noah set the dove free again, and waited – and the dove did not return. Noah knew it had found enough to live and stay free from the ark – and so, it was time to open the doors and step out, and to begin the long difficult work of restarting life and rebuilding a world.

I have heard people compare our response to this virus like our response to a blizzard – and then, to a great cold winter. I remember preparations for blizzards in the Midwest and East. You knew it was coming. And you got ready. Like in the stores in these days, people bought up all the supplies they thought they’d need for a time of being snowed in. But the snows, when they came, did not come like great thunderstorms or fires or tornadoes. They came slowly – we watched the weather maps, and prepared – and then the snow began to come – and it took hours and days to pile up and blow in its strangely quiet way. And then came the time of stillness, and then, slowly, bit by bit, a time of digging out.

This comparison works, up to a point. But, really, this coronavirus pandemic is harder to get our minds around. It is causing serious illness and death. And it does spread quickly where care is not taken. But it is even quieter than snow – and far less visible. We do not know where and when we will encounter it next. But it has indeed flooded the world. At this point, there are three and a half million confirmed cases of infection, and a quarter of a million deaths, worldwide; and in the U.S., 1.1 million confirmed cases and over 67,000 deaths. And that is likely a low estimate, as the testing used has a high error reading of “false negatives,” for which the results for some who truly are infected come back showing no signs in the tests. And the death toll is likely higher, as nations have not truly been able or willing to keep up with documentation of deaths brought on by this coronavirus. But its invisibility makes it harder than it was for Noah to judge when it is safe and best to exit the ark. And, in the meantime, like inside the ark where supplies were running low, we also face the many other problems and

challenges that have arisen as we have sought shelter and safety to slow the spread of this flooding coronavirus – like the massive spike in unemployment of millions and the threat of hunger as the typical paths of food distribution have been disrupted.

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. In these parts of the world across the northern hemisphere, it is a time in the middle of the full blooming of springtime – and of tilling, planting, and preparing herds and flocks to return outdoors to grazing. Life continues. God’s breath of life keeps breathing over and through creation, and through us human beings. But the pacing of things matter. As we who garden know, planting too early will leave us with greater threat of frost and of young plants killed by freezing. Planting too late will miss the moist cool that is best for seeds to germinate and burst through the soil. Setting herds out to the fields too early could threaten the growth of healthy grasses that are needed to last through the summer and early fall, as cattle and sheep and goats munch happily and plants that need a bit more time to bounce back and continue to grow. But the animals’ food supply that kept them through the long winter is running low, and they need to get out for their own health.

Wise farmers and herders are always weighing the balance of things. Wise parents do the same with their children and households. Wise teachers consider how much at a time to press new learning. Wise healthcare workers weigh the balance of what the body can take in any aggressive effort toward restoring health and combating disease. Wise leaders must also judge similarly, weighing the balance of important and good things, and weighing the threats.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus likens himself to the gatekeeper for the sheep – the one who has the safety of the sheep first and foremost in mind, who brings them into safe pasture and leads them out when the risk is lower. *“The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.”* The gatekeeper knows his sheep. They know him. And there is clear care, and there is trust. More than that, this gatekeeping shepherd goes to the front of the flock to lead them, and so faces the risks along the path first. *“Anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit.”* Anyone who does not approach the care of others with wisdom and watchfulness and forbearance is likely to take risks with others, or neglect others, or rush to quick judgments. Jesus even goes on to say not only that he is the gatekeeping shepherd, but the gate itself. Jesus is the One who keeps and holds us all.

As we return, slowly, along the various phases of re-entry into shared common life in our businesses and organizations and communities, we do so with watchfulness and with care. We want the best for all. And this current situation has presented us with choices that must be weighed in balance – where pain and difficulty must be experienced in some places in order to maximize the best for all long-term. Those are not easy decisions to make. Like leaders on a battlefield where losses are expected, the decisions are incredibly hard. We will face these long beyond the threat of the coronavirus as we once again look to the consistent and persistent issues of racial and economic injustice in our society, the plight of refugees, and the care of the poor who will always be with us – and are us.

I encourage you this week to read and re-read, and to pray in conversation with, Psalm 23. That treasured Psalm is for much more than funerals. It is for life itself, in all its ups and downs, from start to finish. Pray it. Plead it. Argue with it. Listen to the Lord reach out to you in it.

And then, ask yourself, “How am I called in this time to join Jesus in being a shepherd?” Remember, none of us are alone, even in answering this question. We join together not just as sheep, but, in the whole community of St. Luke’s, as shepherds ready to step out and follow the lead of our great gatekeeping and gate-opening shepherd, Jesus, the Risen One. How can we help lead and shelter and offer care and defense for those affected by this time we continue to move through? How can we make a difference for those who are now unemployed? How can we help make sure people have daily bread and find shelter?

St. Luke’s, now is a time for us to be creative. Now is a time for us to prepare – and to act. To get ourselves ready for re-union in whatever new ways we will come together again – and to open wide our doors for others – and, even more, to offer ourselves in care, service, and devotion to others all around us. Now is a time for us to draw on our wisdom and strength together, to find and support good pathways for people as they begin to move forward and try to find their bearings again.

I look forward to good and creative conversations and connections among us in this month, as we seek to make good paths forward in partnerships with others across north Idaho, even as we take slow, steady, thoughtful steps in how we open the gate and move out once again into pastures, always measuring with care the risks and the gifts, not just for our own sake but for the sake of others. Now is a time when we are called to be the Church in a way that emphasizes service and care far and above worship. And now is a time when we can consider what it might mean to open our homes to others for small gatherings of fellowship and prayer, to sustain and strengthen us and to put ourselves in the hands and care of the Good Shepherd, the Risen Christ Jesus our savior, friend, and guide.

Amen.