

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Acts 2:42-47

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

John 10:1-15

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 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. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. 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 steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

Good morning. It is good to be with you this morning. Even if the way we are meeting together is not our usual way, it is still good to meet this way, online, using digital technology. We are Rockland Congregational Church, and we have a beautiful meeting house at 180 Limerock Street, where we are not meeting. But the church is not a building, and it does not matter where we meet. What matters is *that* we meet. In the past, Christians have met together in houses, in open air meetings, in tents, in boats, in underground catacombs, in prisons, in gymnasiums, in storefronts, in buildings of all shapes and sizes. This morning we meet online. We meet to share in the essentials of our faith, to sing and pray together, to hear the Scripture read, to hear the message of the Gospel, to share in communion, and to give thanks to God.

1. Contemplating Scripture.

In response to our Scripture readings this morning, I want to talk about history, leadership, and the voices that influence us. We continue to follow the lectionary readings for Easter. The texts of the New Testament were mostly written between the years 50 and 100 AD. This morning we read from the Book of Acts and the Gospel of John. In Acts we have a glimpse of early Christian life. And in John, we have the famous passage about Jesus the Good Shepherd. These ancient texts still speak to us today. They offer us insight and courage, and they remind us how important it is to listen to voices we trust, and the importance of trust in living and working together as a society, and as a faith community.

2. Successful Communities.

Our reading from Acts describes an idealized Christian community. The church has not always lived up to the ideals described in Acts, but we keep trying. The community in Acts is successful in two ways: they were devoted to the apostles' teachings, and they shared their food

and money with each other. They broke bread together, and ate their food with glad and generous hearts. People in successful communities have trustworthy leadership; they enjoy spending time together, eating together, and sharing things with each other. In today's world, pure communal living is unlikely. In western culture there are few viable alternatives to capitalist economies. But one of the lessons we are learning from the Covid-19 pandemic crisis is that we could do better when it comes to sharing resources. There are degrees of capitalism, and at the moment, our society is held in the grip of capitalism's most predatory form based on unfettered greed and driven by neoliberal ideology. We can do better than this.

People in successful communities have trustworthy leadership, and they enjoy spending time together, eating together, and sharing things with each other. In John's Gospel we read the famous description of the Good Shepherd. This is another way of describing a successful community and trustworthy leadership. In the text, Jesus describes who a trustworthy leader is, and compares this to who a trustworthy leader is not. The Good Shepherd walks through the gate, the main entrance, in plain sight, while bandits and thieves climb fences, trying to avoid being seen. And the sheep know the Good Shepherd's voice. They will not respond to a stranger's voice.

3. The Voices We Should Be Listening To.

The human voice is a very interesting thing. Each voice has a unique timber, pitch, resonance, and inflection. We instantly recognize voices, and the sound of someone's voice immediately brings up all kinds of memories, associations, and thoughts about that person. In ministry, the sound of the pastor's voice can bring comfort and reassurance. We recognize this in our own church. When we listen to Pastor Seth deliver a sermon, we respond as much to the

sound of lovingkindness in his voice as to the actual words he speaks. Over time, a congregation develops trust in their pastor; trust that is associated with the actual sound of the pastor's speaking voice.

We live in a time when it is increasingly difficult to trust. We are constantly sifting through lies, spam, propaganda, and spin. The smoothest voices are often the ones with the most spin. The purest, most innocent sounds may be layered with hidden agendas. It is baffling, confusing, and irritating. But Jesus says, "I am the gate. I am the Good Shepherd." "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly." "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

There are many voices competing for our attention. But we should only listen to those voices which we know are legitimate, knowledgeable, and are working to do good in the world. These are the people who walk straight through the gate. They are not bandits and thieves. They are not trying to get something in exchange. They are not hawkers or carnival barkers, selling ginzu knives or vacuum cleaners or bridges in Arizona. They are not promoting themselves, but they have devoted their lives to service. We should not be listening to people whose highest concern is making money. We should not be listening to people who care more about money than the lives of human beings. The Good Shepherd walks straight through the gate. The Good Shepherd cares about the lives of all beings, cherishes every life, loves each life. These are the voices of people who will tell us the truth, even to the point of laying down their own life.

4. Heroes and the History of Pandemics

The earliest known pandemic, probably typhoid fever, occurred in 430 BC, during the Peloponnesian War.¹ There followed three pandemics in the Roman Empire: the 2nd century Antonine Plague,² the Plague of Cyprian in the 3rd century, and the 6th century Plague of Justinian,³ the first outbreak of bubonic plague which killed 50 million people.⁴ In 1347 bubonic plague appeared again, this time killing 200 million people, one third of the world's population. Continuing in the 17th and 18th centuries, outbreaks of plague reoccurred across Europe. In 1637, Martin Rinkart was the Lutheran pastor in Eilenberg, Germany. It was during the 30 Years' War, and Rinkart's town was already devastated by famine. Then the plague struck Eilenberg, killing eight thousand people in one year, including the town's four other clergy and Rinkart's wife.⁵ Pastor Rinkart did not leave town, but stayed to help the sick and bury the dead, performing funeral rites for 40 to 50 people a day. He buried 4,480 people that year, and still somehow maintained an ability to give thanks to God. Martin Rinkart wrote the hymn we sang this morning, *Now Thank We All Our God*.

The Spanish Flu of 1918 was the worst pandemic in modern history, killing 50 million people. But the Spanish Flu did not originate in Spain. No one knows where it started, but the first known case was identified at a US Army Base in Fort Riley, Kansas, on March 11, 1918.⁶ World War 1 had been raging for four years, and the Allied countries censored news stories

¹ History.com editors, "Pandemics that Changed History," <https://www.history.com/topics/middle-ages/pandemics-timeline>, accessed April 29, 2020.

² Ibid.

³ Caroline Wazer, "The Plagues that Might Have Brought Down the Roman Empire," *The Atlantic*, March 16, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2016/03/plagues-roman-empire/473862/>

⁴ History.com, "Pandemics"

⁵ Chappell Temple, "Pastoring in Plague-Time," Wesleyan Covenant Association, <https://wesleyancovenant.org/2020/03/16/pastoring-in-plague-times/>

⁶ History.com editors "Spanish Flu," March 27, 2020 and October 12, 2010, <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-i/1918-flu-pandemic>

about the epidemic. It was covered up “to keep morale high.”⁷ In March and April of 1918, 200,000 American soldiers were sent to Europe, without knowing that many of them were carrying the H1N1 flu virus with them. But because Spain was a neutral country, Spanish media was free to cover the outbreak, “first reporting on it in Madrid in late May of 1918.”⁸ Because Spanish news sources “were the only ones reporting on the flu, many believed it originated there.”⁹ In 1918 government censorship of the news was a blunder that cost millions of lives.

Last December, Dr. Li Wenliang, a 33 year-old ophthalmologist in Wuhan, China noticed seven patients, quarantined with a virus, in his hospital. Dr. Li warned his colleagues about the outbreak and advised them to “wear protective clothing to avoid infection.”¹⁰ Four days later, Chinese police accused him of making false and illegal comments. They threatened to arrest him if he continued to say anything about an outbreak of infectious disease. A week later, Dr. Li himself contracted the disease from one of his patients. A few days before he died of Covid-19 on February 7th, Dr. Li went public with his story and immediately became an international hero.

The Good Shepherd walks straight through the gate, through the main entrance, in plain sight, while bandits and thieves climb fences, trying to avoid being seen. And the sheep know the Good Shepherd’s voice. They will not respond to the voices of thieves and bandits. Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” Let us remember all those who have laid down their lives speaking the truth. Let us listen to these voices, the ones we can trust. Jesus said, “The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not

⁷ History.com editors “Spanish Flu,” March 27, 2020 and October 12, 2010, <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-i/1918-flu-pandemic>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Stephanie Hegarty, “The Chinese doctor who tried to warn others about coronavirus,” BBC News, February 6, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-51364382>

own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.” Let us not listen to the voices of those who do not care about others, but only care about themselves. Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.”

I don’t know about you, but I am listening these days. I am listening for voices like this. For voices that care more about feeding hungry people than about protecting their stock portfolios; voices that care more about protecting all the doctors, nurses, and hospital employees than about cutting deals and making profits on other people’s tragedies. And I am listening for voices that speak the truth, without a spin, even when it gets them in trouble. And I am listening for voices that respond to people who call out for help, because I need to hear some voices I trust. And I am listening for kind and caring voices of gentle souls who go beyond their limits, working in stressful conditions beyond my comprehension to help others. Last week, a gentle soul, New York City emergency room doctor Lorna Breen had given everything she had to help others. She went beyond her own limits, and it killed her.¹¹ She is my hero. I am listening for voices like hers because I need to know there are still people in the world who care for others, that we have not become a completely cynical and self-centered society, and that every once in a while, someone speaks with the voice of the good shepherd.

“So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief

¹¹ Marisa Iati and Kim Bellware, “NYC emergency doctor dies by suicide, underscoring a secondary danger of the pandemic,” The Washington Post, April 28, 2020
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/04/28/nyc-doctor-lorna-breen-coronavirus/>

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comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”” Amen? Amen.