

Easter 4 May 3, 2020 “Good Shepherd Sunday”

This past Friday was May Day, the holiday to celebrate workers, and together the Vermont Workers Center and Migrant Justice, along with about a dozen other labor and community groups sponsored three public demonstrations in Vermont, one in southern Vermont, one in the Upper Valley and one in Burlington. Elizabeth and I attended the Burlington rally. Now in the past, I’ve attended these rallies on the steps of the Vermont Statehouse, and I’ve even had the honor of being asked to MC one of the rallies a few years ago. We have celebrated the struggles of working people, heard their testimony of resilience and resistance and their passion for justice on the job site. But in this time of physical distancing, we had a very different manner for carrying out the celebration: we all stayed in our cars, decorated with signs, and there was a Zoom call in number (of course there was!) So that everyone could hear the speakers. We formed a long procession, there were over 100 vehicles! and drove by the Hospital to show support for the healthcare workers, by a school to support the teachers (even though it was closed), by a couple of supermarkets to support the grocery workers and by the Vermont Department of Labor in support of the unemployed workers. It was a good way to have a strong May Day celebration for 2020, but I must say, I can’t wait for the day when we will be able to celebrate May Day again standing with each other in solidarity instead of just showing up in cars!

Prayer: O God our Good Shepherd, we hear your voice in your Word for us this day, and may we be lead to green pastures and guided along the path of your righteousness; this we ask in the Name of Jesus, our Good Shepherd, Savior and friend. Amen.

Welcome to “Good Shepherd Sunday” and Good Shepherd online. I always look forward to this Fourth Sunday in the Easter season, because we read the passage from John’s Gospel account of Jesus as the good shepherd, and we also read the 23rd Psalm as well. As the Church of the Good Shepherd in Barre, I always feel that this Sunday is our time to shine. Of course, like everything else in our topsy turvy world now, everything changed from what I had expected. Months ago, along with the Vestry we invited our new Bishop, Shannon MacVean-Brown, to come to Barre today for her first Episcopal Visit to Good Shepherd. We had begun making plans for the day and celebrating her visit, when we had to shut the Sanctuary due to the coronavirus outbreak. Have no fear, we will re-schedule and Bishop Shannon will visit, but like everything else nowadays, we do not know exactly when or how it will take place. But just like I want to have a May Day celebration standing together in solidarity, I also want to have a visit with our new Bishop with the full fellowship of her presence among us at Good Shepherd.

Knowing that this Good Shepherd Sunday was coming up, I’ve been thinking a good deal about shepherds recently. Of course, nowadays it is

pretty rare to see a shepherd, although Alan Roger's son Craig is now raising a flock of several thousand sheep in Virginia, so I guess it is kind of fitting that a son of Good Shepherd should have one of the largest flocks on the East coast! Also, if you didn't know, Alan worked for Rock of Ages for over 40 years as a draftsman, and he designed and installed the granite plaque that quotes John's gospel that we heard today. So literally, the story of Jesus the Good Shepherd is part of the very fabric of our church building. But still, thinking about shepherds is not something that we do much nowadays. Of course, about 200 years ago, as I was reminded at Bible Study this past week, there were many more sheep than people in Vermont. But that was long ago, and so today, we don't have much of a model for knowing what a shepherd is and what shepherds do. The scriptures, though, do give us an idea about what a shepherd should be. First, as Jesus says, that good shepherd knows the sheep, the good shepherd has that deep relationship with the sheep, so that the sheep know the good shepherd and trust the good shepherd. I was especially interested that Jesus says the sheep know the voice of the good shepherd, which to me indicates that the shepherd's voice has a tone that elicits that deep trust, so that the sheep will follow because of that deep trust they have, a trust so deep that by hearing the voice alone, the sheep know where to go.

But I think there is something even deeper than this: although we have no way of knowing for sure, no simple academic and historical

exercise which can demonstrate as an infallible truth that King David is the source of the 23rd Psalm, as I said in Bible study this week, I would be willing to stake whatever I have on that claim. I just cannot imagine anyone other than David composing the 23rd Psalm. But I suppose it doesn't really matter, but what matters is the profound lesson it teaches us: a shepherd looks forward in faith. The Lord as our shepherd, brings us to a place that is good for us, the green pastures and the still waters, but at the same time, the shepherd brings us new life, a life based on God's justice, a new life that even in the midst of the greatest trials we face, even as we come too close to death itself, too close for comfort, still the deep trust in God leads us way from that fear, it is God who leads us and who watches over us as the shepherd watches over the sheep. The care and leadership of the good shepherd really stand out here. This is a tender care that endures to the end, the understanding that, "surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me *all* the days of my life" This is the leadership that has a long horizon, looking to the future, "and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." I think it is those two characteristics, the tender care and the farsighted leadership that make this image of the good shepherd so powerful for us. To claim "The Lord is my shepherd," is to live deeply into the tender care and guidance gives offers us, to take up the gift of amazing grace for our lives. This morning, as we celebrate the good

shepherd, we celebrate God's care and the trust God gives us in our lives as we follow in God's way. Living in the fullness of God's love.

Now, in this time of pandemic, today in this time when we are physically distant and craving a quick return back to normal, what does it mean for us to proclaim Jesus as our Good Shepherd? As I mentioned last Sunday, there is a feeling in many ways that as Christians, we are living in a time of exile, not unlike the Exile of the people of Israel, the seventy years they spent in Babylon after the conquest. Taken away from Jerusalem and Judea, taken to a foreign land, they had to learn to live faithfully in a time and a place that were not normal for them. This is captured in Psalm 137, in the pointed question, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" Well, while none of us expect to live in this exile in our time for seventy years, we will not be going back to normal any time soon. Earlier this week I read that the Episcopal Bishop of New York has said that the churches of the diocese will not reopen for worship before July 1st. Now, I don't know if this will be the case here in Vermont, I am pretty sure we will not reopen our Good Shepherd for at least another month. But during this time of exile from our parish, we are learning to be Good Shepherd in a new way. Worshipping online, gathering together virtually throughout the week for Bible Study and prayer, for Yoga and Tai Chi, finding ways to be faithful even in a physically distant way is teaching us the value of the tender care and the

leadership of our good shepherd. We are learning to care of ourselves and others in these new forms and keeping centered in our trust in the love of God shown to us in Jesus our Good Shepherd. We are undertaking our mission, sharing our food with those in need here in Barre through our community breakfast program and seeking to make sure that as our homeless neighbors now have shelter we can advocate for our community organizations and state and local governments help to ensure that safe and adequate shelter will be available once the crisis of the pandemic is behind us. Perhaps, as followers of the Good Shepherd, we can employ the love Christ showered on us, take the blessing we are given at this time, to embody the tender care and the foresighted leadership of our Good Shepherd. The time which will open up before us will not be simply going back to our prior lives. First of all, there will be many new public health practices we will need to practice, face masks being one of the most obvious, but probably the easiest sign of the new time in which we will live. Perhaps more significantly, the soaring unemployment and the poverty and want it will spawn will be the focus of our energies, mission and prayers for a good while to come. We now know that importance of essential workers in our community and in communities throughout out nation, and we will be called to find the ways to care for their well-being and the welfare of their families and loved ones for the welfare of all. We will be called to respond faithfully, to respond as the followers of the

Good Shepherd with tender care and leadership that shows the trust we have in God's compassion and mercy. Now is the time for us to pray and prepare to become that Church of the Good Shepherd in a new way, in a way that is faithful to our namesake. God's Holy Spirit has lead us now into a new place, in the midst of this pandemic, to become Good Shepherd in a new fashion, bringing the Good News of Jesus, his tender mercies and love, to our community in the days and the weeks to come. So as we celebrate Good Shepherd Sunday this year, we do so in a new way, and on the cusp of a new time and a new challenges as the faithful flock. We know, however, we know that just as the good shepherd has supplied our needs by the power of the Holy Spirit in ages past, God will continue to be our hope for years to come and give us the amazing grace to carry on God's mission even in the difficult times we now face. Thanks be to God for this amazing grace and thanks be to Christ, our Good Shepherd, leading us through the valley of the shadow of death, but calming our fears and comforting us as we take up the mission to bring this Good News into our world. Amen.