



ST. ELIZABETH EPISCOPAL CHURCH

For centuries, Christians have sustained a story about shepherds in the biblical age. We cast them as uncouth outsiders without resources or learning; as despised religious outcasts. There are, however, problems at the root of this image. It is a portrayal based not in scripture, but in Greek philosophy and the Babylonian Talmud, writings that preserve the rabbinical interpretations and debates compiled around 500 C.E. (There is also one rather ambiguous but influential line in the Mishnah, a collection of oral teachings published at the end of the second century C.E.)

Aristotle spread his low opinion of shepherds in *Politics*, but he was not a first-century Jew living in Palestine. He lived 300 years before Jesus in Greece, making his opinions irrelevant here. The Mishnah and the Babylonian Talmud, while not irrelevant, capture the opinions of rabbis so far removed from the first-century context that they are unreliable.

When we look to scripture, a different image emerges. Shepherds in the ancient world were among the working class, though they were not despised outcasts. They claim a long line of honorable Hebrew scripture figures, beginning with Abel, the son of Adam, and followed by Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Rachel, Moses, David, Job and Amos. All highly respected. Sheep continue to be important in the Holy Land and caring for them is still quite personal and intimate.



Today's readings have much to say about right relationship, and about those who seek a gateway not back to former times, but a passageway to new times based on trust, on mutual respect and loving-kindness (does that sound like the realm of heaven?) We are eager to hear about Jesus being a "good shepherd," and yet today's Gospel reading about Jesus the "good gate" emphasizes what God desires for all creation. This passage is less about the status and character of the shepherd or sheep, and far more about the quality of the relationship forged *between* the shepherd and the sheep, and the implications for how the followers of Jesus are intended to interact with others.

My friend and colleague, the Rev. Dr. Samuel Torvend writes: "...there is pasture ahead, that is, there is life, and health, and wholeness flowing from this wounded shepherd into the hands of healthcare providers, scientists, wise and compassionate politicians, grocery store clerks and pharmacists, school kitchen cooks, food pantry workers, and housing activists – flowing into the hands and lives of Christ's friends in the world who in gestures and words small and great, are cultivating hope – greening pastures – in others."

Preparation

Some Christians celebrate Easter and Christmas, and then return to a familiar pattern of hymns, readings and sermons. Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Orthodox Catholics and many other denominations keep some version of the Great Fifty Days of Pascha, the season that lasts until Pentecost. We are now halfway through Pascha. If we were gathered at church, we would have our finest vestments on the altar, which would be surrounded by beautiful flowers and bearing new beeswax candles. The new Paschal candle would be lit and standing in a place of prominence right between the lectern and the baptismal font. We would light our best incense and sing some of our favorite hymns. We'd gather at the table to celebrate with our best port and some home-made bread.

While we are temporarily separated (and then, only physically so), consider taking this as an opportunity to bring some of that intention home. Home worship is the oldest form of Christian worship with more than a little Jewish influence. And so, if you can, invite the Risen Christ into your home with a white tablecloth and a new white candle on the table or desk where you are collected. You might set out a favorite cross or rosary and spend a moment summoning up a sense of gratitude and forgiveness with friends or family by phone or through social media. Offer it with loved ones no longer living or saints that you admire. Listen to some liturgical music, maybe a short motet <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SI3-veEning> or [youtube.com/watch?v=I5fYXDsh_YU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I5fYXDsh_YU) for a longer taste of heaven as you pray. And, as always, notice that our worship is voiced in the plural – “we,” “us” and “our” – because we may be temporarily apart, but we are also always bound together in Christ.



Fourth Sunday of Easter 26 April 2020

Centering

Make the sign of the cross as the leader says: May the light of Christ in glory rising scatter the darkness of heart and mind. (+) Alleluia! Christ is risen.

All respond: Alleluia! Christ is risen.

The leader prays: O God of peace,
who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ,
that great shepherd of the sheep,
by the blood of the eternal covenant,
make us perfect in every good work to do you will,
and work in us that which is well-pleasing in your sight;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Word of God for the Fourth Sunday in Easter

The Gospel is the primary reading of the day and should always be read. The Gospel follows after a reading from Hebrew Scripture, a Psalm and a reading from the early church, should you choose to read all the texts for the day.

A reading from Acts: Those who had been baptized 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.

Reader: The Word of the Lord

Response: Thanks be to God

(The response: Prayed together or by alternating verses) Psalm 23

A song of David to God

YHWH, my shepherd, you supply our needs;
we don't ever feel deprived.
You feed us in the meadows;
we are led to quench our thirst by a quiet stream.

You stir our souls
and guide us gently
through the thicket
of right action;
such is Your Fame.

At times, we must make our way
through dark and dangerous gullies,
but because You are with us,
we won't panic if we have to face evil.

Both Your rebuke
and Your bracing support
give us comfort.

In the presence of adversity,
You set us a feast
at which our anxious heads are soothed
and our thirst is amply slaked.

[Because You have invited us]
we affirm that only goodness and graciousness
will manifest for the rest of our lives,
in which we will always be at home with You.

A reading from the first letter of Peter: It is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.

“He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth.”

When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

Reader: The Word of the Lord

Response: Thanks be to God



Read the gospel aloud without rushing. Allow the images to enter your awareness and find a home within.

A reading from John: [Jesus said] “Amen, amen, I tell you, someone who does not enter the sheepfold through the gate, but climbs in another way, is a thief and a bandit; But the one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. To this man the gatekeeper grants entry, and the sheep hearken to his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has herded out all of his own, he goes before them, and the sheep will follow him, because they know his voice; And by no means will they follow a stranger, but rather will flee from him, because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus pronounced this proverb for them, but they did not understand what the things he was telling them were.

So Jesus spoke again: “Amen, amen, I tell you that I am the sheep’s gate. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not hearken to them. I am the gate; if anyone enters in through me he will be saved, and he will go in and will go out and will find pasture. The thief does not come except so that he may steal and slaughter and destroy; I came that they might have life and might have it in abundance.”

Sermon:

Somewhere along the way in the past 15 or 20 years, the church became fascinated with running more like a business. We wrote vision statements, pored over forecasting spreadsheets and hired consultants to draft strategic plans. Even now, we are seeking phased plans for re-opening our churches. That’s all fine and good.

Practices borrowed from business do give people some fleeting sense of control; some sense of what to expect. Back when I was in corporate life, I helped craft some of those things and I always reminded my clients of what the brilliant Prussian Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke once wrote: “No plan of operations extends with any certainty beyond the first contact with the main hostile force.”

The intent of these practices is not really control, but consistency. Done well, these exercises won’t actually tell you everything that you can expect so much as they remind you of why the organization exists. My clients found that they were more successful if they understood that strategic *planning* is not anywhere near as important as strategic *thinking*.

We have made first contact with a hostile force that we were not prepared for. And there isn’t a human strategic plan or forecast that will get us much beyond the next month or so as we learn to navigate this new reality.

And yet, there *is* a powerful vision statement filled with loving-kindness in this reading that too often either gets buried in fluffy Hallmark lambs or lost in academic arguments over who the bandits are or it decays in declarations of who gets to be in to the sheepfold and who is left out.

The life-giving guiding vision in John’s Gospel is truly clarifying: “I came,” Jesus tells the children of God, “that they might have life and might have it in abundance.”

To be clear, this is no promise of escape from reality; it’s a promise to take us deeper into what is real. It’s not a promise of more energy or added length of years; it’s a source of resilience and joy in the presence of all that life hands us.

In short, to have life in abundance is to participate in life to the fullest extent possible – to love more and to feel more pain without being overwhelmed by either; to be present when life flows and when it fades without rejecting or clinging to either. To have life in abundance is to be expanded by living it.

And that takes courage. Not arrogance, but courage. Not self-aggrandizement, but self-emptying courage. Not denial of reality, but perseverance *anyway*. Not humiliation, but humility, groundedness, a sense of being alive with something so full, so much larger than any one of us or any group of us. It means living a life that releases life in other people.

Let me tell you a story.

Fr. Giuseppe Berardelli was a Roman Catholic priest who served a small village not far from Milan called Casnigo. He routinely greeted people with a traditional Franciscan phrase, “Pace e bene” or “peace and all good.” It is a blessing and a recognition of the sacredness of everyone we encounter, and it defines how Fr. Giuseppe lived his life.

Just months ago, if you remember, Northern Italy got hammered by the pandemic. 72-year-old Fr. Giuseppe had a respiratory condition and so when he was infected by the coronavirus, he was moved to a hospital in Lovere.

As his condition worsened, doctors tried to put Fr. Giuseppe on a ventilator, but he refused it so that the machine could go to someone else. When he died, of course, Italy had already stopped allowing funerals, as we have here. Even so, because of the peace and loving-kindness that Fr. Giuseppe spread during his lifetime, when his casket rolled through the village for burial, people stood in their windows and balconies and applauded.

It's a story about one life lived in abundance; one life that released life in other people. And there are thousands of other similar stories, most not quite that dramatic, but all of them lessons in living into the Paschal mystery. Some of them are your stories. I imagine you in this place as I greet the people gathered as Body of Christ and say “Alleluia. Christ is Risen” and even though we are physically separated, I imagine your response: “The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.”

There are faces in my imagination. People living with unforgiving medical situations. Single-parent families losing short-term income or, worse yet, losing jobs. Couples struggling with addiction, ruptured relationships or broken dreams. Families worried about delayed medical interventions. People learning to live with grief, isolation or anxiety.

I love these faces, these faithful people, doing their best to hang in there at the best of times, now having to cope with additional stress. There's always a part of me, a first reaction that wants to give them something, to help in some way or make some of their pain go away.

And then I remember the elegant and often painful testimony that each of your lives present to me and to the world. You don't need me to solve anything. You don't need me to talk you out of what you are experiencing or to make anything go away.

What's needed is just this: "Amen, amen," Jesus says to his followers, "I tell you that I am the sheep's gate."

The Paschal moment involves transformation – symbolic, mythic and sacramental transfiguration. The Risen Christ is our entry into the mysteries, the archetype of those who embody the change we are making and the initiation into the transfiguration we face.

We have this because God has us.

The Risen Christ is the opening – the "sheep-gate" – through which, with God's grace, we enter into each other's lives and listen for the voice of Christ. And so, maybe what's most necessary is a simple reminder to us all of why it is that Christ manifested in human form.

So that Jesus could say: "I came that they might have life and might have it in abundance."

Silence and stillness



The Nicene Creed

Leader: Let us reaffirm our faith in the words of the Nicene Creed:

We believe in one God,

the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,

the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father.

Through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:

by the power of the Holy Spirit

he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.

On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.

With the Father and the Son he (or “she” or no pronoun) is worshiped and glorified.

He (she/who) has spoken through the Prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

We look for the resurrection of the dead,

and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Prayers for the church, the world, and all who are in need

These intercessions may be used, adding others in each household:

Leader: God the Father, your will for all people is health and salvation.

All: We praise and bless you, LORD.

Leader: God the Son, you came that we might have life, and might have it more abundantly.

All: We praise and bless you, LORD.

Leader: God the Holy Spirit, you make our bodies the temple of your presence.

All: We praise and bless you, LORD.

Leader: Holy Trinity, one God, in you we live and move and have our being.

All: We praise and bless you, LORD.

Leader: In the Anglican Cycle of Prayer, we pray for the Nippon Sei Ko Kai (The Anglican Communion in Japan), the Most Reverend Nathaniel Makoto Uematsu, Primate of the Nippon Sei Ko Kai & Bishop of Hokkaido.

In the Diocesan Cycle of Prayer, we pray for St. Mary, Lakewood; St. Joseph - St. John, Lakewood.

We pray for our neighbors at Navos, for Neighborhood House, for Hospitality House, for Operation Nightwatch, and for the safety of those in military service, for the safety and stamina of healthcare workers, for first responders and for their families.

We pray for those on our long-term list.

Let us pray for our own needs and those of others, offered silently or aloud.

Leader: Lord, grant your healing grace to all who are sick, injured or disabled, that they may be made whole.

All: Hear us, LORD of life.

Leader: Grant to all who are lonely, anxious or depressed, a knowledge of your will and an awareness of your presence.

All: Hear us, LORD of life.

Leader: Grant to all who minister to those who are suffering wisdom and skill, sympathy and patience.

All: Hear us, LORD of life.

Leader: Mend broken relationships, and restore to those in distress soundness of mind and serenity of spirit.

All: Hear us, LORD of life.

Leader: Sustain and support those who seek your guidance and lift up all who are brought low by the trials of this life.

All: Hear us, LORD of life.

Leader: We pray for the repose of the souls of Ginny, for Jeff, for The Very Rev. Wm. Ellis and for their families in mourning. Grant to the dying peace and a holy death, and uphold by the grace and consolation of your Holy Spirit those who are bereaved.

All: Hear us, LORD of life.

Leader: Restore to wholeness whatever is broken by human sin, in our lives, in our nation, and in the world.

All: Hear us, LORD of life.

Leader: You are the LORD who does mighty wonders.

All: You have declared your power among the peoples.

Leader: With you, LORD, is the well of life

All: and in your light do we see light.

Leader: Hear us, LORD of life:

All: heal us, and make us whole.

Let us pray.

A period of silence follows, and then:

Leader: Hear the prayer we offer for all your people. Remember in your mercy those for whom we pray: heal the sick, raise the fallen, strengthen the fainthearted, protect those who serve, and enfold in your love the fearful and those who have no hope.

In the fullness of time complete your gracious work. Reconcile all things in Christ and make them new, that we may be restored in your image, renewed in your love, and serve you as sons and daughters in your kingdom.

Through your anointed Son, Jesus Christ, our LORD, to whom with you and the Holy Spirit we lift our voices of thanks and praise:

All: Blessed be God, our strength and our salvation, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Pater Noster/Our Father/The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come; thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,
for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Prayer of spiritual communion

Most Holy Christ, we trust that you are truly present in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar. We love you above all things, and we long for you in our souls. Since we cannot at this moment receive you sacramentally, come at least spiritually into our hearts. We embrace you as though you were already there and we unite ourselves entirely to you. Never permit us to be separated from you. *Amen.*

Concluding Prayer

O thou Source of Love and Compassion
in the sufferings of all thy children,
we offer our compassion also
for the hungry, and the sick in body, mind or heart,
the depressed and the lonely,
all living in fear and under stress,
all stricken in grief,
the unemployed and the rejected,
and those burning with hatred.
Strengthen us to work for their healing
and inspire us to build with thee
the Kingdom of love
where none shall cause suffering to others
and all be caring, loving children of thine,
Our Compassionate, all-embracing Father,
everpresent, everloving,
never failing.

Amen.

Blessing

Make the sign of the cross as you say: May Christ, (+) who by death has destroyed death, give us
all courage and joy in believing. Amen.

Giving Thanks at Table

Come, Lord Jesus,
be our Guest
and let these gifts to us be blessed.
Blessed be God who is our bread,
may all the world be clothed and fed.
Amen.



“Each human being, regardless of birth, status or native ability, has the right to be seen as created as an image of God, filled with infinite worth, equal to all other human beings, and so unique that he or she can say that the world exists only for them. On the other hand, since each and every person can make these claims, the only way people can create a world that recognizes them is through relationship, that is, the partnership between each person and God, as well as the connections between all human beings.”

~ Dr. David M. Elcott

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Opening Gospel image: The Good Shepherd mosaic in Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna, Italy, early 5th c. C.E.

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Closing image: public domain image of *The Road to Emmaus* by Claes Corneliszoon Moeyaert, 17th c. C.E., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

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