

The Rev. Joel Petruschke
Easter 4

Our Saviour Lutheran Church
May 3, 2020

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. Amen.

As I noted at the beginning of this service, today, sisters and brothers in Christ...

Today is the fourth Sunday of Easter.

And it is the day in the life of the church year...

It is the day on the church calendar known as "Good Shepherd Sunday."

Good Shepherd Sunday.

And it is customary on this Sunday...

It is customary on this Good Shepherd Sunday, to hear scripture readings that speak about sheep and shepherds.

It is customary to hear therefore Psalm 23.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.

The Lord makes me lie down in green pastures and leads beside still waters.

He restores my soul.

So on and so forth.

And on this Sunday, it is customary to hear a passage from the tenth chapter of the Gospel of John.

Jesus says, "I am the gate for the sheep."

And Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

And Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me."

Yes, it is customary on this Good Shepherd Sunday to hear bible passages that speak about sheep and shepherds.

PAUSE

And I remind us that in ancient times, the leader of the people was deemed to be a shepherd for the people.

Thus, the king was a shepherd, a shepherd for his people.

PAUSE

Think about the boyhood, for instance, of the greatest king of Israel.

Think about the early years of King David.

What was King David's job as a youth?

Was he a paperboy?

Did he work in grocery store as a cashier?

Was he employed as a waiter?

Was he the babysitter to the younger kids in his neighborhood?

Did he cut grass?

No, he did none of those things.

Instead, he was a shepherd boy.

He tended to the sheep of his family.

And David says that as a shepherd boy he had to contend with lions and bears.

He had to contend with ferocious beasts.

He had to contend with those predators which posed a threat to the flock.

And no doubt when David was king of Israel, and people learned about David's escapades with lions and bears...

No doubt as people heard about King David's exploits as a youth, that is, his run-ins with ferocious beasts...

No doubt as people heard about how David rescued his family's sheep from fang and claw.

No doubt the people thought to themselves...this is why King David is a great king.

He has learned how to shepherd his people because he has had to boldly shepherd his family's sheep.

Yes, to be a king in the ancient world was to be a shepherd.

Yes, to be a leader of the people, one has to know how to protect the people with the rod and the staff.

To be a leader of the people, one has to know how to provide for the people, to lead them to green pastures and still waters.

To be a leader of the people, one has to know how to give hope, and to restore the soul.

To be a leader of the people, one has to calm the fears of the people, to walk with them in the valley of the shadow of death.

To be a leader of the people, one has to be bold, one has to be courageous, one has to fight the metaphorical lions and bears.

To be a leader of the people, one has to give of one's self.

To be a leader of the people, one has to think NOT about what the benefits are, how I can prosper in my position, but how I can best serve.

To be a leader of the people, one has to...has to think of the sheep.

Yes, to be a leader of the people is to be a shepherd of the people.

Leaders need to shepherd.

Because we people get scared like sheep.

We are even afraid of our own shadows sometimes.

We people get lost like sheep.

We put our heads down and wander around, and soon we don't know where we are.

We people get confused like sheep, we get tired like sheep and need to rest, we get hungry and thirsty like sheep and need guidance.

It is true, we people are at best like sheep in need of a shepherd.

We need a shepherd. We need a guide. We need a comforter. We need a provider. We need a redeemer. We need a protector. We need... a shepherd.

PAUSE

Now, some of you, in the course of hearing this sermon...

Some of you, as you are hearing this, have already made the jump in your mind, and are probably asking yourselves, "What of our leaders today?"

You have gotten there before me, but yes, we do need to ask...

Are our present day leaders good shepherds?

Is Donald Trump as President of the United States a good shepherd?

Is Tom Wolf as governor of the State of Pennsylvania a good shepherd?

Is Boris Johnson a good shepherd?

Is Andrea Merkel a good shepherd?

Is Vladimir Putin good shepherd?

What do you think? How do we know? What makes for a good shepherd in these present times?

PAUSE

Now, some would say that our leaders have stepped up to the plate, that they are shepherding well.

That they are giving the sheep daily briefings.

That they are doing their best to guide the sheep through this pandemic.

That they are watching out for the best interests of the sheep.

Some would say that our leaders need to move along and quicken the pace of re-opening businesses.

While others would say, that our leaders should be cautious.

If we re-open too soon, well then we could have a resurgence of the virus.

What is the best thing to do for the sheep is hard to say.

What the right thing is, we don't always know.

In the present day, we are dealing with uncharted territory here.

And so I won't fault our leaders on this point.

I won't go so far as to give negative marks to our shepherds on this score.

I am no political leader trying to manage a crisis, so who am I to say how good of a job they are doing.

But there is one place where I do fault our leaders...

And, on this, I do think I have some ground to critique our leaders.

Where I do think our leaders have come up short...

Where I do think our leaders are found to be wanting...is with respect to our need as sheep for spiritual direction.

Now, I am not saying that our leaders personally need to be the people's prayer warriors, such that our leaders themselves are offering prayer.

Although, maybe that would be good and helpful—to have our leaders praying out loud that which is on their minds and hearts.

It might be helpful for us sheep to hear that.

Indeed why is prayer not included in the daily briefings from the President and Governors?

But surely if our leaders are not comfortable praying out loud extemporaneously, they can certainly solicit the aid of spiritual authorities to help them compose prayers to read.

Or, surely our leaders can invite spiritual authorities themselves to offer prayer.

And it doesn't have to be seen as a political maneuver to win political backing from any particular group of voters.

And it doesn't have to devolve into a point of contention where government leaders are seen as favoring a certain group of spiritual authorities to the exclusion of others.

Indeed, I personally would welcome other voices from other faiths to offer a word prayer.

Line up a whole company of spiritual authorities from various faiths, and have a different faith leader offer prayer each day.

Why not? Right?

If we truly believe that quote, "We are all in this together," then let us rally the troops from all faiths.

Let us circle the wagons of all religious and even quasi-religious groups.

All the more, why don't our government leaders organize a collective prayer meeting...

...a televised coming together of the world.

And let us sing, and let us dance, and let us hear the Scriptures of various faiths...

...and let us join our hearts as one in solemn and holy devotion, while recognizing that as a diverse people throughout the world, it is okay to honor whatever power individuals so choose to honor.

It is okay to recognize that each of us honors whatever power will provide comfort and hope in this time.

This, this is what our shepherd-kings, and our shepherd-presidents, and our shepherd-chancellors, and our shepherd-prime ministers, and our shepherd-leaders need to be doing...

In addition to daily briefings...In addition to managing supply chains...In addition to overseeing logistical matters...

In addition to caring for the physical needs of people, and the fiscal needs of people...

Our shepherds need to sustain the spiritual needs of the people.

PAUSE

Now, some would argue that this is what we ministers are for.

Some would say that I am preaching to myself.

Yes, we ministers have an important role to play in caring for the spiritual needs of people.

But when we are talking about a global pandemic, more needs to be done to care for the spiritual needs of the people than can be done at the local level, by an individual minister, or even a small collection of ministers.

No, the shepherd-leaders whom we elected have to support the effort of spiritual care for the populace.

To not do so is to miss the opportunity to gather the sheep into one flock, so that we don't scatter in panic.

To not do so, to not tend to the spiritual care of the populace, is to miss the opportunity to galvanize the herd to experience a powerful sense of optimism for the future, so we are not left to fret and fear.

To not do so, to not address the spiritual care of the populace is to miss the opportunity to instill hope in the sheep, so we are not left confused and lost.

What an opportunity for our shepherd-leaders, to guide the sheep...

What an opportunity which I fear may go unheeded...

What an opportunity which may go unnoticed...

What an opportunity for our world to come together.

Pray with me, then, that the Spirit would move our shepherd-leaders.

Pray with me, Friends, that our shepherd-leaders would be so moved to pray and to act for the spiritual well-being of the sheep.

Pray with me...Holy and Gracious God, Good Shepherd of us all, we are the people of your pasture, and the sheep of your hand. As our Good and Gracious God, you have raised up shepherd-leaders to guide us in our lives. Bless these shepherd-leaders in their work to tend to the sheep in their care. Most especially, empower them with your grace that they would help comfort the sheep by calling us all to turn to you. In Christ, we pray...Amen.