

Message for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 3, 2020

Good morning church, friends and everyone listening...

It's Good Shepherd Sunday, and all the good Shepherds are busy teaching their sheep social distancing behaviors. Bizarre! Usually the shepherd tries to keep his flock as closely together as possible, to make sure they are within inches of one another. Well, not these days! These days, sheep are eating their meals on separate pastures. They are wearing masks. They are wearing gloves. They are staying six feet apart. And when one sheep sneezes, all the others jump and run. God knows what droplets are being sprayed on us!

In the old days, the sheep were scared of predatory animals - wolves, coyotes, human thieves. Not these days! These days it is all about a tiny, invisible virus spreading disease that's hard to detect and fight. It's difficult being a shepherd these days. Your instinct is to keep your flock closely together, but you can't.

And so, on this Good Shepherd Sunday 2020 I am reaching you as you each camp out on your own pasture. Some of you are still comfortable in your surroundings, perhaps even enjoying that long break from your daily commutes to work. Others are getting anxious, nervous, depressed, worried about money, longing to see and touch other family members, sick of going against your social instincts. There are baby sheep in your family that you haven't kissed in a long time. You miss them! You ask the question that plagued both Moses in the desert and Noah in the ark: how much longer? Are we there yet? And you see the answer on the faces of your shepherds: we're not there yet! Not yet!

They say people are social animals, and it is true. So much of our culture, so many of our pastime activities are centered around things that we do together. Hey, at least the golf courses are opening again in Pennsylvania! So much of church life is centered around shared activities and social life – laughing, singing, praying, playing and sometimes weeping together. We can't do that now, at least not the way we'd prefer. We speak to each other from a distance, through screens, windows and phone lines... And some of us are hurting, because your lives have become overwhelming and socially distanced companionship through screens and headphones bring nowhere

near the same comfort level as when we are able to look each other in the eyes and show our love in real time. So, this is really a different Good Shepherd Sunday.

Yet, in some respects our experience this year moves us closer to faith and closer to the One and Only Good Shepherd. When I read this gospel chapter from John 10, it occurs to me that the Jesus never says, "My sheep see me and touch me and will recognize me by handshake." He never says: "My sheep know me from the hugs that I give them." Instead he says this: "My sheep hear my voice and they know it's me. And they will never follow a stranger." When the Apostle John wrote those words attributed to Jesus, the first century was coming to a close. Christians were socially distanced from the Jesus who had walked the earth more than 50 years earlier. They could only reach Jesus by faith. They could only hear him with their spiritual ears.

And so, while this is a time of sometimes painful distance from our loved ones, it is also a time when we can sharpen our spiritual ears to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd, to reflect on things we can do better. And consider this: while human hearing capabilities decline after a certain age, spiritual hearing can improve with age. Yes, your hearing can get better the longer you live, your spiritual hearing, your judgment, your ability to discern good from evil, phony from real, superficial from essential. So please, flock, wherever you are, wherever you listen to this message, take advantage of those quiet times to listen and hear to the Good Shepherd. Draw closer to Him even as you keep a distance from one another. Be blessed and hear His voice in the midst of all of this.

Amen.