

Reflections on Faith and Life for May 3, 2020

Jesus said, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” Our problem is not in believing his statement, but in knowing the truth. Pray that your capacity to receive the truth is not blocked by pride or by the ungodly thought that you already know enough truth (Benson and Benson, p. 115).

We should all be praying that right now, as politicians and medical personnel, and people out of work threatened with losing their livelihoods and people at special risk for dying of the COVID-19 virus—as we’re all inundated by “facts” and so much conflicting information we can’t sort it out. May God help us to be wise and discerning in these troubled times!

My sister, RJ, in California subscribes to an on-line Christian website which provides many laughs for me and Rose; it’s called “Mikey’s Funnies,” www.mikeysFunnies.com. No charge, so feel free to take advantage of it! On April 28th this is what was reported:

WORSHIP PLANNING, Coronavirus Pandemic Edition

Rejected hymns:

- We Gather Together
- Just a Closer Walk with Thee
- Breathe on Me, Breath of God
- Precious Lord, Take My Hand
- Close to Thee

Accepted hymns:

- Wash, O God, Our Sons and Daughters
- Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley
- I Come to the Garden Alone
- Trust and Obey

They must’ve been listening in on a Lutheran Planning Committee! Closing thought for the day: *Is anyone else’s car getting 3 weeks to the gallon?*

One of my daily devotionals is Guideposts *All God’s Creatures*. The piece for April 29th is entitled “Solar-Powered Chickens,” by Marianne Campbell. She starts out saying the hens need 14-16 hours of sunlight to produce an egg.

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This is why egg production slows down when days get shorter in the fall and sometimes stops for a while in winter. It's not the cold weather that gets in the way, but the amount of light.

The author continues by drawing a parallel with the time Christians need to spend with Jesus, the Son of God. "To produce abundant fruit for the Lord," she writes, "I need to put in the time under the Son, soaking up his influence" (*All God's Creatures*, May 2019-April 2020, p. 381).

During my internship at the Oshkosh Correctional Institution in 1997, I learned a word that has come to have great meaning for me: *synchronicity*. It means *same time*, and it's used in theology to refer to "related things happening at the same time." I'm often amazed when I hear an unusual word or thought expressed two or three times in the same day.

That happened today (April 30) when our gospel is about Jesus the Good Shepherd and the devotional for today (which must have been written at least a year ago) is about sheep. This writing is from the same *All God's Creatures* published by Guideposts; each day there's a devotional that draws parallels between God's relationship with us and some species of animal (including insects, reptiles, birds, and more common pets).

Author Lori Hatcher writes, "*Sheep are a lot like people. Sometimes sickness, fatigue, or stress make us physically vulnerable. Other times the burden of work and responsibilities weighs us down. We lose our spiritual balance. . . and can't rescue ourselves. All we can do is cry for help. Then Jesus, the Good Shepherd, comes to our rescue. He lays his strong hands upon us, lifts us up, and supports us until we can stand again. Through the power of his presence, he reassures us we are not alone. Through the healing of his word, he infuses us with strength. Through the indwelling Holy Spirit, he supports us until we are again able to step out in faith.*"

May you personally experience the tender loving care of our Good Shepherd this week!

P.S. To those of you who prayed for my Bosco when his cancer was diagnosed, thank you! He's doing well! If you have any prayers left for Prisca (14 and blind), we'd appreciate them as she has her left eye removed next Wednesday.

Worship for May 3, 2020 (COVID) ORDER OF WORSHIP, p. 1

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Call to Worship -- Psalm 23 (As you read these beloved words, imagine yourself in the care of this Good Shepherd, with all your needs being met.)

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 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 my 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 shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen.

That translation is an old one; here's a contemporary version (TNIV, *Today's New International Version*):

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Suggestion for Children's Time: Can you act out what these words mean? Make a scene in your living room or playroom where you can have green pastures and a river of quiet water. Create a dark valley. Make a shepherd's staff with a curved handle on top (the "crook" is for rescuing sheep that are stuck or in trouble). Set up a snack on a "rock" or table. Make the sign of the cross on each other's forehead. Fill a glass with cool water or juice and enjoy a picnic together. And give thanks to God for providing all this!

Confession of Sins: Gracious God, we acknowledge that we are sinners, and we confess our sins—those known to us that burden our hearts, and those unknown to us but seen by you. We know that before you nothing remains hidden, and in you everything is revealed. Free us from the slavery of sin; liberate us from the bondage of guilt; work in us that which is pleasing in your sight; for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Declaration of Forgiveness: With a heart full of mercy and compassion, God saves us and forgives us all our sins. Christ, the dawn from on high, shines upon us, and by the light of the Holy Spirit guides our feet into the way of peace. Amen.

Gathering Hymn *Beautiful Savior*

*Beautiful Savior, King of creation,
Son of God and Son of Man!
Truly I'd love thee, truly I'd serve thee,
Light of my soul, my joy, my crown.*

*Fair are the meadows, fair are the woodlands,
Robed in flow'rs of blooming spring;
Jesus is fairer, Jesus is purer,
He makes our sorrowing spirit sing.*

*Fair is the sunshine, fair is the moonlight,
Bright the sparkling stars on high;
Jesus shines brighter, Jesus shines purer
Than all the angels in the sky.*

*Beautiful Savior, Lord of the nations,
Son of God and Son of man!
Glory and honor, praise, adoration,
Now and forevermore be thine!*

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you.

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The Kyrie (“Kyrie” means “Lord”)

In peace, let us pray to the Lord. **Lord, have mercy.**

For the peace from above, and for our salvation, let us pray to the Lord.
Lord, have mercy.

For the peace of the whole world, for the well-being of the Church of God, and
for the unity of all, let us pray to the Lord. **Lord, have mercy.**

For this holy place where we worship, and for all in Christ’s body who offer
now their worship and praise, let us pray to the Lord. **Lord, have mercy.**

Help, save, comfort, and defend us, gracious Lord. **Amen.**

Hymn of Praise

Now the Green Blade Rises 148

1 Now the green blade ris - es from the bur - ied grain, Wheat that in
2 In the grave they laid him, love by ha - tred slain, Think - ing that
3 Forth he came at Eas - ter, like the ris - en grain, He that for
4 When our hearts are win - try, griev - ing, or in pain, Your touch can

dark earth man - y days has lain; Love lives a - gain, that
he would nev - er wake a - gain, Laid in the earth like
three days in the grave had lain; Raised from the dead, my
call us back to life a - gain, Fields of our hearts that

with the dead has been;
grain that sleeps un - seen; Love is come a - gain like wheat a - ris - ing green.
liv - ing Lord is seen;
dead and bare have been;

Order of Worship, p. 4

(oops, I don't know how to enlarge the hymn, so here are the words)

*Now the green blade rises from the buried grain,
Wheat that in dark earth many days has lain;
Love lives again, that with the dead has been;
Love is come again like wheat arising green.*

*In the grave they laid him, love by hatred slain,
Thinking that he would never wake again,
Laid in the earth like grain that sleeps unseen;
Love is come again like wheat arising green.*

*Forth he came at Easter, like the risen grain,
He that for three days in the grave had lain;
Raised from the dead, my living Lord is seen;
Love is come again like wheat arising green.*

*When our hearts are wintry, grieving, or in pain,
Your touch can call us back to life again,
Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been;
Love is come again like wheat arising green.*

Prayer of the Day: O God our shepherd, you know your sheep by name and lead us to safety through the valleys of death. Guide us by your voice, that we may walk in trust and hope to the joyous feast prepared in your house, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

A reading from Acts (2:42-47—Today's reading is a description of life in the community following Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit was poured out on God's people. The new community is sustained in worship and fellowship, shares what they have, and ensures that everyone has enough.)

(This passage is entitled "The Fellowship of Believers"—do you recognize those words from when I remind us that "We are the body of Christ, the communion of saints, the fellowship of believers"?)

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

A reading from First Peter (2:20b-25) *If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth" (Isaiah 53:9). When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his own body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.* The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Introduction to the Gospel (say it in your outside voice!) **Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!**

The holy gospel according to John the tenth chapter (10-18). **Glory to you, O Lord!**

Jesus said, *"Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. **He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.** When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice."* Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them.

Order of Worship, p. 6

*Therefore Jesus said again, “Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. **I AM** the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; **I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly (to the full).***

I AM the good shepherd.** The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. **I AM the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me**—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. **I have other sheep that are not of this fold (sheep pen).** I must bring them also. **They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.** The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father. The gospel of the Lord. **Praise to you, O Christ!

Sermon (please read at this time; the sermon follows the order of worship)

Sermon Hymn: (on next page)

476

Have No Fear, Little Flock

The musical score is written in a two-staff system (treble and bass clefs) with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). It consists of three systems of music. The first system contains four numbered lines of lyrics. The second system contains three lines of lyrics. The third system contains three lines of lyrics. The melody is primarily in the treble clef, with accompaniment in the bass clef.

1 Have no fear, lit - tle flock; Have no fear, lit - tle
2 Have good cheer, lit - tle flock; Have good cheer, lit - tle
3 Praise the Lord high a - bove; Praise the Lord high a -
4 Thank - ful hearts raise to God; Thank - ful hearts raise to

flock, For the Fa - ther has cho - sen To
flock, For the Fa - ther will keep you In
bove, For he stoops down to heal you, Up -
God, For he stays close be - side you, In

give you the King - dom; Have no fear, lit - tle flock!
his love for - ev - er; Have good cheer, lit - tle flock!
lift and re - store you; Praise the Lord high a - bove!
all things works with you; Thank - ful hearts raise to God!

© Text: Luke 12:32, st. 1; Marjorie Jillson, b. 1931, sts. 2-4
© Tune: Heinz Werner Zimmermann, b. 1930

LITTLE FLOCK
66 76 6

Order of Worship, p. 8

The Apostle's Creed God has made us his people through our baptism into Christ. Living together in trust and hope, we confess our faith:

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Uplifted by the promised hope of healing and resurrection, we join the people of God in all times and places in praying for the church, the world, and all who are in need.

Shepherding God, we thank you for the ways your church—the body of Christ—continues to be your hands and heart in this broken world. Protect all caregivers from contagion; comfort and heal bodies ravaged by the COVID virus and other diseases or conditions. Give wisdom to medical and political leaders so that all people may learn to live wisely with this situation. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Creating God, we praise you for all “essential” personnel who provide food by farming or marketing; for those who make themselves available to sell and distribute needed items; for health-care and emergency workers who serve when and where they're needed. Protect and guide them as they put themselves at risk. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Guiding God, no one should be in want. Call the nations to return to your paths of righteousness, and inspire our leaders to walk in your ways, so that all may have the opportunity to live abundantly and sustainably. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

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Comforting God, you carry us tenderly. We pray for those who walk through dark valleys overshadowed by anxiety and overwhelmed with anger, fear, or suffering. May they feel your strengthening presence in their lives. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

With bold confidence in your love, almighty God, we place all for whom we pray into your eternal care; through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

Benediction May the Lord bless you and keep you; may the Lord make his face to shine upon you and give you peace; may the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace (Numbers 6:23-26).

Sending hymn (on next page)

SENDING

Go, My Children, with My Blessing

543



1 "Go, my chil - dren, with my bless - ing, nev - er a - lone.
2 "Go, my chil - dren, sins for - giv - en, at peace and pure.
3 "Go, my chil - dren, fed and nour - ished, clos - er to me.



Wak - ing, sleep - ing. I am with you, you are my own.
Here you learned how much I love you, what I can cure.
Grow in love and love by serv - ing, joy - ful and free.



In my love's bap - tis - mal riv - er I have made you mine for - ev - er.
Here you heard my dear Son's sto - ry, here you touched him, saw his glo - ry.
Here my Spir - it's pow - er filled you, here my ten - der com - fort stilled you.



Go, my chil - dren, with my bless - ing, you are my own."
Go, my chil - dren, sins for - giv - en, at peace and pure."
Go, my chil - dren, fed and nour - ished, joy - ful and free."



Text: Jaroslav I. Vajda, b. 1919, alt.
Music: Welsh traditional, arr. Ralph Vaughan Williams, 1872-1958
Text © 1983 Concordia Publishing House
Arr. © Oxford University Press

ARHYDNOS
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Stay in place to love and serve the Lord! **Thanks be to God!**

Sermon Easter 4, May 3, 2020 (COVID) (Jo 10:1-18; Ps 23; Acts 2:42-47)

Context! CONTEXT! Our earliest biblical ancestors were shepherds. Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and David are introduced to us as *keepers of sheep* before we learn to know them as leaders of the faith. In the first thousand years of biblical history, shepherding was one fairly secure way to make a living. Shepherds were well-respected, often-wealthy people. But by the time of Jesus, we know they weren't held in such high esteem.

Shepherds then were societal outcasts who couldn't hold down a job in the city. Dirty and smelly, ritually unclean, they could never come to worship. Yet it was to shepherds on the hills outside of Bethlehem that the angel first proclaimed the Christmas message: **Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy that shall be for all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ, the Lord.** Those shepherds were the first people to visit the newborn baby who would later become the Messiah.

In this, as in all other events of his life, Jesus was associated with the people who didn't count for much in polite society: the last, the least, the little, the lonely, the lost.

Some thirty years later, in teaching the Pharisees and his disciples, Jesus used the image of a shepherd to refer to himself. His hearers must have been stunned, even *scandalized*. No wholesome, faithful, pious person would stoop that low! Yet Jesus not only identified himself as the gate of the sheepfold, and then as the shepherd of the sheep—he spoke of himself in words that clearly identified him with *God*.

Here's a very important language lesson. Back in the third chapter of Exodus, when God spoke to Moses out of the burning bush, Moses asked God to identify himself. "You're sending me to tell Pharaoh to let your people go," he said. "If he asks me who you are, what shall I tell him?"

God replied with a phrase that orthodox Jews even today won't speak because it's so holy, so precious—it's the holy name of our holy God. Basically, what God said meant, *I am who I am*.

Here's a brief history lesson, so the *context* makes sense: The Old Testament was written in Hebrew. About 250 years before Jesus' birth, a group of seventy rabbis translated the Hebrew scriptures into Greek, the common language at that time.

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When the rabbis translated God's words to Moses, what they wrote was "ego eimi"—**I AM**. God said, *go to Pharaoh and tell him I AM has sent you*.

In Greek, the verb form itself tells who's *doing* the verb. If you know any Spanish or French, you'll be familiar with this. If not, please just take my word for it. What's important is, because of the way Greek verbs are structured, there's no need to say "I" before a verb.

So when Jesus said, **I AM the gate for the sheep**, using the pronoun I ("ego"), the first thought of the people would be something like, *my goodness, he's taking the Lord's name in vain!* Only *God* could be **I AM**. And when he said a moment later, **I AM the good shepherd**, they must have done a double-take: how could the holy, all-powerful *God* be equated with a dirty, outcast *shepherd*?

Every time Jesus made one of his **I AM** statements (more than a dozen times), his hearers would have reacted with the same sudden sense of *wrongness*. Only **God IS**, so how could Jesus be saying **I AM**?

I wish I could explain it better—it's just one more way in which looking at the *context* can make us realize how very differently we hear the Bible today than when it was first written down. The words we read simply don't carry the power to astonish, or even *shock*, that they did 2000 years ago.

Basically, what the people heard Jesus say that day was, *I am God, and I am a shepherd*. God is holy and perfect; God is also smelly and dirty and outcast.

We don't hear that. When we think of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, we picture the stained glass window or the painting. Sheep are fluffy and cute, and God's in his heaven and all's right with the world.

But Jesus was a rabble-rousing rebel against the established religion of the day. The Pharisees—at least, most of them—were teaching people to obey the laws of Moses (all 613 of them) in order to please an untouchable God. The more laws the people broke, the greater the number of sacrifices would be at the Temple—and the better the Pharisees would live.

Sermon, page 3

Jesus turned all this on its head. When Jesus is the gate for the sheep, everyone can enter. *Everyone. Anyone.* When Jesus is the Good Shepherd, all people are welcome in his flock.

Can we really understand what this means? Jesus himself has taken on the image of someone who was untouchable—so that today's *untouchables* can enter his sheepfold.

Jesus speaks strange words—I AM—in a way that completely does away with our status quos. *Status*, he says, *doesn't mean anything. All people are welcome in my fold. All of you are members of my flock. So are all the people who worship in other ways, in other places.*

I AM the good shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me, and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen... They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.

Do you know the voice of the *real* Jesus? The one who's always looking for strays to bring into the fold? Do the words and deeds of Jesus ever shock you into thinking, *Whoa, he can't really mean that, can he?*

Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly (*Christian Century*, March 27, 2002, p. 19).

The Good Shepherd, the one who died so that all may live, is the eternal gatekeeper. It's up to *him* to decide who's in and who's out. Sometimes that's hard for us to accept. Each of us has some one, some certain class or group of people, we want to exclude from the holy flock of Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

But our Good Shepherd laid down his life, of his own accord, so that *all* people might have life, and have it abundantly.

Are *you* ready to accept it? It's yours for the taking! Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed, alleluia!**

Thanks be to God!

Unfolding Light by Steve Garnaas-Holmes, April 30, 2020

Dearly Beloved,

Grace and Peace to you.

Psalm 23

Beloved, you shepherd me gently.

You free me from desires.

You bid me lie down in green pastures.

You lead me beside calm waters.

You revive the breath within my breath.

You guide me in the paths of harmony for the sake of your delight.

O, though I walk through the deepest canyons
shadowed by death

I fear no evil

for you are with me.

Your shepherd's staff, your steady hand,
they comfort me.

In the face of what I fear
you provide a feast for me.

Your blessing is a long, warm shower.

My plate is full.

Surely goodness and mercy will companion me
all my days,

And I will dwell in your intimate presence
every moment of my life.

Deep Blessings,

Pastor Steve