

Lent 4A March 22, 2020

On this fourth Sunday in Lent, our world is experiencing a tsunami of fear. Our world is anticipating unimaginable sorrows. Our world is grasping for hope. It is important to name that fear, and speak of sorrows, and listen for the definitive word of hope.

There is a phrase that I am hearing more and more from people: "I've never seen it like this before." I hear those words from frustrated grocery store shoppers. I hear those words from people who are self-quarantined at home. I've said those words myself. Have you? To whom have you said "I've never seen it like this before?"

Times like these raise in people a hunger for safety, and comfort. In times that can undo our desire to be in control of our lives, a place we can go is to comfort food. Comfort food enables our bodies to recall a more innocent time. Your comfort food may remind you of days gone by. Your comfort food speaks stability to your taste buds, and calm to your hungering body, while outside your home... it is anything but calm. Comfort food simply makes us feel good.

The Psalm that is appointed for the 4th Sunday in Lent is Bible comfort-food. "The Lord is my shepherd....I shall not want," and in hearing those words you may experience a somatic response: a chill, a tender embrace in the arms of safety, a breath of relief, a tear that betrays a deeply held anxiety.

I have always been taken by the image of green pastures. I have lived in the Sonoran Desert, a land similar to the foothills of Palestine, for most of my life. Here green pastures are not a natural phenomena. Desert pastureland is different than pastureland in the upper Midwest or Southeast where green is a given.

In the desert, to hear that we may lie down in green pastures implies that no other flock had ever been there. A green pasture would not only be a treat, it would be a treasure. For a flock of sheep to enter a green pasture would be stunning. "We've never seen anything like this before." We've never seen anything like this before.

Could it be that God who created the flock of which you are part, has created other flocks as well? And could it be that this same God, who breathed life into your lungs on your birthing day, continues to breathe life-giving breath into all of those other flocks so that we, together, would join our voices in singing praises to the author of all life? I know that image is all too impossible in the world where we live. We could. It would take a lot to untie the knots of generations of ego-laden traditions that were created to keep us separate. Imagine....the sound of union. Imagine the sound of peaceful joy. Imagine the sound of people helping people, not pausing to listen to the praise that will come....but to continue to work together for the benefit of everyone. Of course, our response could simply be, "I've never seen anything like this before." Well, duh, of course you haven't. We love the violence, we love the injustice, we love the war that rewards the winner and thwarts the loser. We love being in control. We love being right. We love protecting our small piece of real-estate. We've never seen anything like that before. You think?

I hear those words a lot these days. I've never seen anything like this before....as grocery store shelves empty.

The Psalmist invites us to put our trust in the shepherd. While our heads and hearts will long to lead the shepherd and the rest of the flock, we are called to follow, to trust, despite the

difficulties of the trail, despite the distances we may need to walk....it will be there that we shall know a holy rest.

The shepherd makes me lie down in green pastures, and leads me beside still waters. The shepherd revives my soul: Life-giving grace, Hope filling peace, that non-anxious grounding that God offers to those who live with fear, with doubt, with worry. Could those be the comfort your soul needs this day?

The shepherd revives my soul: life-giving grace, hope filling peace, that non-anxious grounding in God's presence wherever you find shelter.

We have never seen anything like this before. And the days ahead would seem to engage our endurance, and our confidence in the Spirit's strength to reside in here.... May that become the gift of spiritual comfort for you today....and despite what the headlines and talking heads are proclaiming, may your words "I've never seen anything like this before, and the Lord is here" become your creed for this Lenten season.

"Shelter in place" is simply this Lenten way of saying "I will lie down in green pastures...." The shepherd watches over you. The shepherd dwells within you. The shepherd is the Lord. This is the Lord's offer to you in the midst of the fear and chaos of pandemic. Lie down in green pastures, rest by still waters...dwell in hope, and keep calm... we have never seen anything like this before. The Lord is my shepherd. Amen.

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March 22, 2020
Tucson, AZ