

Faith Lutheran Church, First Presbyterian Church, Our Redeemer Lutheran Church

Sunday, May 3, 2020
Fourth Sunday of Easter



Opening Prayer

Please join me in prayer:

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 certainty and security 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.** (from the Fourth Sunday of Easter, © sundaysandseasons 2020)

Readings and Psalm

- *Acts 2:42-47* *The believers' common life*
- *Psalm 23* *The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not be in want. (Ps. 23:1)*

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside still waters;
He restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for His name's sake.
Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I 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 goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

- *1 Peter 2:19-25* *Follow the shepherd, even in suffering*
- *John 10:1-10* *Christ the shepherd*

The Holy Gospel according to John 10:1-10, NRSV

(<https://members.sundaysandseasons.com/Home/TextsAndResources#texts>)

[Jesus said:] ¹“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. ²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” ⁶Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what He was saying to them.

⁷So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who came before Me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters by Me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

The Gospel of the Lord.
Praise to You, O Christ.

Sermon

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, on this Fourth Sunday of Easter. Amen.

I'm a social person or at least I think so; most of the time anyway. I enjoy seeing people, being with people, and talking with people. Don't get me wrong. I love my alone time at home with my husband and our pets. But these six weeks or however long it has been since we've been able to socially interact with others has proven to be a little difficult for me.

I have, however, had the opportunity to gather with folks via Zoom, a video and audio teleconferencing program. First, let me say that I'm not a paid spokesperson for Zoom. There are several other similar resources but most of my colleagues use Zoom.

I have participated virtually in many Zoom meetings with our Synod Bishop and colleagues, the Presbytery, and the Text Study colleague group that usually would meet once a week in the Soo. Church Councils are meeting via Zoom. Congregation members gather via Zoom just to check in. Other planning groups are meeting via Zoom. It certainly isn't the same as physically being together but at least we can see and listen to one another. I like it because there is much less chance of someone reading something into a text or an email that can create problems!

This week, a couple of my church bodies met via Zoom to start discussing what is involved in order to start having services again. Now, before you get too excited, please know that we are still at least a month away from this! All three of my congregations have suspended worship services and activities until June 7th. This date is a couple of weeks beyond the current Stay Home, Stay Safe Executive Order. This date is also two weeks after Memorial Day weekend when many people may be traveling to the UP or downstate and come in contact with someone who may be asymptomatic of the coronavirus.

There are many things to consider before opening the church building doors. Should we all wear masks? Should the ushers wear gloves to hand out bulletins? Do we leave the offering plate in the narthex and ask members to leave their contributions on their way out? Obviously, fellowship will be suspended for an even longer period of time. How do we mark off pews or chairs so that people aren't sitting too close to one another and still be able to maintain social distancing? Do we offer Holy Communion and how do we do that safely without touching one another? Oh goodness, the list is much more extensive and there will be many more conversations had before we are able to safely open our buildings for worship.

And then there are other questions that we should be thinking about: What WILL the new normal look like? What will the *new way* of doing church look like? Was the previous model of how we did church so great that we want to repeat it? This would be a great time to think about what worked well and what didn't work so well and make appropriate changes. This is even beyond wearing masks and marking off pews.

I believe the main question we should all answer before our worship buildings open up is this: what does **God** want the *new church* to be?

Today is recognized as Good Shepherd Sunday. In our gospel reading for today, we hear Jesus teaching about the shepherd of the sheep. Those He spoke to could relate to His preaching because that was one of the main livelihoods; being shepherds and tending sheep. Shepherds, who were out in their fields for very long periods of time, practiced social distancing long before the term was created.

Jesus tells them what they already know, to an extent – that the sheep hear their voice and follow the shepherd. The sheep won't follow anyone whose voice they do not recognize. Yet He goes further to explain that HE is the gate, the one through whom they will find protection. The One through whom they will find comfort and salvation. And that it is *only* through Him that they will have life.

We know from John 14:6 that Jesus *is* the life: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." In John 11:25, Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life." And in John 8:12, Jesus says, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

And in today's gospel, Jesus says, "I came that they may have life, and *have it abundantly*." What powerful words to hear even in this day and age!

So, what does *abundant life* mean to you? Maybe this *isn't* the best time to think about what abundant life is. Especially during this time of pandemic when our movements are restricted, worship services in church buildings are suspended, and as depression and anxiety continue to grow among many. Do we really have anything abundant right now? Is *this* the abundant life Jesus came to bring? Actually, yes, it is.

Abundant life might be something different for you than it is for me or the person living next door or down the street or around the globe. Abundant life might be healing powers to those affected by the coronavirus. It might be restored sight to the blind. It might be food to the hungry. Abundant life might be companionship and fellowship for the lonely. It might be acceptance and support for the one being bullied. It might be physical, emotional or financial relief for the millions of Sisters and Brothers that are struggling right now. Abundant life might be just gratefulness for the continued spiritual connection we have with one another during this time of social distancing.

"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." *Now*. Abundant life now. Not just something that we look forward to at the Second Coming of Christ. Not just something that might be far off into the future. *Now*.

During this time when we have been unable to physically gather together, we have figured out ways to BE the church. We have been able to figure out ways to care for one another and help one another; ways to pray for one another without being in a building.

Let us also use this time to figure out what *abundant* life means to us; the life that we *only* find in Christ Jesus. Let us figure out how we can recognize and enjoy and celebrate this abundant life we have through Christ as we prepare to enter our church buildings again. And then share. Share the stories of how Jesus' abundant life is shown to us in our lives to those who yearn to hear of God's love; in the name of Christ, the Great Shepherd. Amen.

Blessing

And now, may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. (*Philippians 4:7*)

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. *A brief silence.*

Shepherding God, we thank You for the educational ministries of Your church. Enrich the work of teachers, professors, mentors, advisors, and faculty at colleges, seminaries, and learning sites. We pray for those in our school systems who have worked tirelessly to teach our young people in new and various ways.

Creating God, we praise You for those who maintain and operate farm equipment, for those who plant and harvest crops, for local farmers' markets, and for those involved in agriculture of any kind. Strengthen their hands as they feed the world.

Guiding God, no one should be in want. Bid 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.

Comforting God, You carry us tenderly. We pray for those who walk through dark valleys overshadowed by anxiety and overwhelmed with suffering. We pray for all who ill in body, mind, and spirit, especially those we name in our hearts, our minds, and with our voices....(please name your prayer concerns). Bring comfort and strength to all affected by the coronavirus. We pray for adequate testing and the hope of a vaccine to come. Bless all scientists and doctors who work towards a cure.

Nurturing God, You desire justice for the hungry. Bless advocacy work, food pantries, and feeding ministries in our congregations. May none of our neighbors lack for basic needs.

Everlasting God, Your beloved have heard Your voice; You have called them by name and guided them to Your side in death. We thank You for their lives of faithful witness.

With bold confidence in Your love, almighty God, we place all for whom we pray into Your eternal care; through Christ our Lord. **Amen.** (prayers from the Fourth Sunday of Easter, © sundaysandseasons 2020)

Our Lord's Prayer

I invite you to join in praying the prayer our Lord Jesus taught us to pray...

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, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen

Benediction

May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord's face shine on you and be gracious to you. May the Lord look upon you with favor and grant you peace; in the name of God the Father, God the Son+, and God the Spirit that makes us one. Amen.

Dismissal

Go in peace to serve our Risen Lord! **Thanks be to God!**

Food for Thought

Abundant life. During this time of the "Stay Home, Stay Safe" Executive Order, how have you experience abundant life through Christ in the people around you? How have you seen the people of God working to help one another, working to help you, through this time? Would you care to confidentially share your thoughts with me? Please feel free to call me at (906) 293-8331 (ORLC office) or (906) 291-0897 (Cell).