

Sermon May 3rd, 2020

Jesus is Our Shepherding Voice as We Feel Stuck in the Pen

As I listened to our gospel this morning, an image of a whole lot of sheep crammed together standing less than two meters apart in a pen, so desperately wanting to be let out into the pasture, popped in my head. Their voices crying out for the gates to open. Their frustration over having to spend so much of their lives in this little enclosure waiting for someone to come and lead them into greener pastures. Beside still waters.

Reflecting on our current environment, I wonder if, like the sheep, we feel stuck in our pens. Frustrated at all the limitations we have had to adopt during this pandemic. Longing for our leaders to lead us out of the pen and into greener pastures. Beside still waters.

For many of us early spring is a time to take a vacation, and enjoy the warmer weather down south. Giving us a break from the cold Canadian winters. We are not supposed to be stuck up here, dealing with the back and forth: Is it spring? Is it not? Is it spring? Is it not?

For many of us we want to hang out with friends and extended family at restaurants, cafés, bars. We want to go to sporting events and concerts. Not be stuck on the couch by ourselves watching an old game or concert on tv that we have seen about a hundred times by now. I can only watch the Oilers beat the Flames so many times before it starts to get mundane. On second thought, I could probably watch the game from Feb 1st a few more times.

For many of us we want to go shopping for groceries without having to put a mask on first or worry about sanitizing everything we come in contact with. From our hands to our clothes to our phones to our keys.

For many of us we want to go for a walk outside without worrying about the person who is carelessly getting into our two-meter invisible bubble. Some of you have jokingly suggested that we need to walk around with hockey sticks to keep that physical distance in place.

For many of us we want to be able to throw a birthday party for our child where they can invite all their friends, and play cool games. While indulging in an ice cream cake from Dairy Queen. Without worrying about whether the person making the cake was wearing a mask and following the proper health measures.

For many of us we want to be able to go back to our jobs where we can earn a living and feel like we are contributing to our society. We don't want to have to rely so heavily on our governments to pay our bills.

For many of us we miss going to our places of worship where we connect with our community, and experience the comfort and presence of God we often feel, when sitting in our pew in the sanctuary on Sunday morning.

For many of us our world has shrunk so much so, that like the sheep in our gospel, we are living in the pen waiting for someone to lead us out to the pasture so we can eat some refreshing grass.

This is how many of us feel on a daily basis as we get used to living in this new normal. Yet, we know that these measures that our leaders have put in place are there to help keep us safe. They are leading us like a shepherd who leads their sheep out of the pen only when it is safe to do so. No shepherd lets their sheep out into pasture when they see wolves coming.

Still, even with knowing that staying in the pen as much as we can is probably our safest bet, this doesn't prevent us from listening to a voice or two that says something contrary to what our leaders are saying. A voice that says what we want to hear versus what we need to hear.

There is a lot of misinformation out there that is triggering more fear, anxiety, and confusion in us as we are stuck in the pen. Information that is getting us to question the very leaders who are trying to keep us safe. Information that is downplaying the grief, pain, and suffering that many people have faced due to COVID 19. Information that is encouraging us to take unnecessary risks.

The impact of this illness is grave, but like the sheep, who are threatened by predators and other ailments when they leave the pen, we wish we didn't have to be stuck in the pen so much. We long for the things that brought enjoyment to our lives before this pandemic started.

This is why we become more susceptible to the other voices out there that are offering to lift us over the fence. Offering to lead us out another way. Except, I don't believe their ways will lead us into greener pastures. Beside still waters. Only one voice can truly do that for us. And that is Jesus' voice.

In our gospel this morning, we see that following Jesus was challenging to say the least. The disciples faced persecution on a daily basis. They had to live so differently from what they were used to before Jesus came into their lives. They were very susceptible to being led by other voices.

What Jesus says in response to this temptation is "keep listening to my voice". In fact, Jesus has faith in us that we as believers will be able to recognize Jesus' voice in the midst of all those other voices. And that we will listen to this voice. This voice that promises us that it will lead us into greener pastures where we will find enjoyment.

Beside still waters where we will find peace from our anxieties and fears. This life-giving voice that breathes new life into us.

What I find often when we listen to these other voices is that we end up hearing a life-destroying message. One that plays on our fears and anxieties. One that leads us to divide and hate. One that encourages us to risk our health and our lives including those we love. One that doesn't lead us into greener pastures, but leads us beside muddy waters.

Jesus's life-giving voice is the one we can trust in. And what we know about this voice is that it encourages us to love our neighbor. To keep our neighbor safe by being safe ourselves. To help each other access the essential things we need. To care for each other as we grieve. Unlike the other voices that keep telling us to blame one another.

I get it. We have all been impacted so deeply by what is happening. We feel stuck in the pen. We want more access to the pasture we knew. We are more susceptible to hearing the voices out there that offer us relief, but without the shepherding love of a savior.

What Jesus is saying to us in response to our cries is that Jesus is our shepherd. Jesus is caring for us and protecting us through the leaders, professionals, and frontline workers in our communities. Through the friends and family who are staying connected with us in new and creative ways. Through our online studies and worship services. Through the words in the Bible that give us strength and hope for tomorrow. Encouraging us to see that though we are stuck in the pen today, Jesus will lead us into greener pastures. Beside still waters. And that Jesus' healing and redemption we witness on Easter is touching our lives yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

Let us pray, compassionate God. You are our Shepherd. Comfort us as we feel stuck in the pen. Walk with us through this dark valley. Grant us patience, wisdom, and faith to stay the course and see that your pen is the safest place we can be at this time. Protect us from those voices that try to harm us. And open our ears to hear your voice. Trusting that you will lead us into greener pastures. Beside still waters. **Amen.**

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